

The Power of Differentiation

by Sonja H. Sutherland

A woman in her early forties came into my office. She was frustrated. Exasperated actually. She experienced fleeting moments of feeling ready to throw up her hands and just give up. In actuality, she was throwing her right arm up into the air again and again. She couldn't stop—and this was partly the source of her exasperation.

Angela is a smart, motivated, self-assured woman. She is the executive director of a business which she and her husband founded. From a traumatic birth situation, she developed athetoid cerebral palsy, resulting in erratic, involuntary movements of her torso, arms, head and neck, and legs. She uses her powerchair to get around, stands to transfer herself, and walks short distances with assistance. Ten years ago, she and her husband became pregnant, and that is when I met her. She wanted some “Feldy support” through her pregnancy, as she would say.

Angela had already had many Feldenkrais lessons over her adult life with an excellent practitioner. That person had begun traveling out of the area, so Angela was referred to me. I gave her a series of lessons throughout her pregnancy. After she gave birth, we did another series of lessons oriented around getting up and down from the floor more easily to enjoy floor time with her baby girl. We also did lessons about crawling, rolling, sitting, and moving around on the floor.

Today, Angela came in annoyed. She was complaining to me about how her spasticity was driving her particularly crazy. As she was telling me this, she was wiggling and jumping with unusual vigor: exaggerated, short, involuntary bursts of flailing through her right arm and torso. Her pelvis, legs, and feet appeared more tense than usual. She told me that whenever she tries to control her spasticity, it simply gets worse. “My spasticity has a mind of its own and it's driving me nuts today!” she exclaimed.

I was tempted to help reduce her spasticity through the quality of contact with my hands and through my somatic connection with her, something I had done many times during previous lessons. In those lessons, by regulating the

intensity and shape of how I physically organize myself—internally and in relation to her—I gave more weight and form to her flailing, involuntary movements in the context of her intended, voluntary action. This established a full, supportive, and responsive connection with her. Maintaining this kind of dynamic connection within myself and with Angela reduced her spasticity significantly, and we had explored many Feldenkrais lessons this way—in standing, kneeling, sitting, and lying on her back, stomach, or sides.

But today was different. Instead of relying on the support of my contact and connection with her to influence her spasticity, I wanted to empower her to directly influence her spasticity herself.

As a Feldenkrais practitioner, I usually ask my students to reduce their effort as they organize themselves toward completing a complex action. Even if being able to perform the action is not the main goal, many Awareness Through Movement lessons are built around a complex action theme. Slowing down and reducing extraneous effort provides time and space for new ways of organizing one's self to emerge on many levels.

However, whenever Angela would try to slow down and reduce her effort without my hands-on support, her involuntary flailing would increase dramatically. Feeling like she might fly apart, she would then clamp down on herself, which would increase her flailing even more. So today, instead of having Angela reduce her effort, I helped her to differentiate how she organizes her act of efforting.

An Anatomical Definition of Differentiation

Many people think of differentiation as simply making distinctions.ⁱ But considering differentiation from an anatomical perspective opens the door to another dimension of understanding how we develop, grow, form, and function.

Every cell in a person's body stems from one single cell that multiplies, divides, and differentiates.ⁱⁱ All of our cells remain deeply related as they differentiate to form a myriad of diverse, interrelated, functioning body parts.

The Power of Differentiation was originally published in the Feldenkrais Journal No. 28, 2015

We are more than the sum, or the synergy, of our interrelated parts. Through differentiation, every cell in our bodies is inherently “intra-related.”

This perspective informs how I understand the Feldenkrais Method. It also resonates with my experience of giving, receiving, and observing FIs. Years ago I was attending a Feldenkrais training as a visiting practitioner. Mark Reese was giving someone an FI, and a new student asked Mark if he was going to integrate the distinctions and clarifications he was making with the person at the end of the lesson. Mark explained that he was always integrating every movement in every moment during the lesson. While Mark was touching the student’s ribs, I could observe how he was not just working “on a body part” or only addressing the dynamic functional relationships between the student’s ribs or between his ribs and other body parts. At every moment, Mark was including the student’s entire movement pattern on multiple levels in the context of how this student functions.

When giving FI lessons, I consider every clarification or suggestion I make in the context of the whole person—as an “integrated distinction” or a differentiation, a distinct action pattern that is novel, yet in relation to how the person currently functions and what he or she is interested in forming.

Differentiating the Act of Efforting

With this understanding of differentiation, I suggested we work directly with how Angela organizes her efforting in relation to her involuntary flailing. Instead of reducing her effort, I asked her to add muscular effort to her involuntary movements to make them more defined and clear. This included how she organized her whole self (not just her arms and upper body, but also her pelvis, legs, breathing, mouth, throat, eyes, hands, etc). As if body surfing in the waves of her own inner ocean, I asked her to catch her involuntary waves and add more intensity and muscular form to her movements. This created a new type of wave, a differentiation of her involuntary wave that included her voluntary participation. Basically, I was teaching Angela how to do for herself what I previously would do for her. In previous lessons, I helped Angela regulate her spasticity by joining with her involuntary movements and then intentionally modulating the pressure—the firmness or softness I would create in me while in contact with her through my hands.

Without trying to correct her involuntary movements, I added my voluntary influence. Now Angela was learning to join with her own involuntary movements and influence her spasticity through modulating her own efforting.

Angela practiced adding more form, more muscular effort to her involuntary movements to make her pattern more pronounced and vivid. I encouraged her not to exaggerate her movement pattern by making it bigger or more wild, but to maintain its size and use muscular effort to make it thicker, more dense. Following the shape of her involuntary flailing, Angela made a clear and directed movement upward and then a downward: Bang! She practiced adding more voluntary effort, more intensity to both the upward and the downward movement, turning it into a pounding action. Bang! Bang! Bang! With a big grin on her face, Angela banged purposely, defiantly, and clearly again and again.

Instead of struggling against her involuntary flailings, she supported, influenced, and formed them into an organized, complex action. Instead of relying on me to manage her spasticity, Angela influenced her pattern of spasticity herself. This created a new dimension of self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-esteem.

As Angela turned her involuntary flailing into a self-influenced, defiant “Bang!” she exclaimed, “Chutzpah. This feels like a new kind of chutzpah.”

Differentiating Angela’s “New Kind of Chutzpah”

“To alter the course of an existence, the whole attitude and manner of action must be changed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

– Moshe Feldenkrais

Chutzpah is a Yiddish word. For Angela, it is also an inherited and honed family tradition. It is what she relies on in her life to overcome challenges, forge ahead, and get things done. Angela’s chutzpah has served her very well over the years. She has accomplished many things with the help of her chutzpah. And it is a cherished family quality. It took a lot of chutzpah on my

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part to suggest she continue differentiating her freshly formed “new kind of chutzpah,” but I did it. I did it for three reasons:

1) To create greater “stickiness,” more sustainability in her learning. By having Angela differentiate her freshly formed chutzpah, she would create related organizations of this behavior that would support her new learning.

2) To build more layers of connections within and in relation to how she organizes her freshly formed chutzpah. Moving, feeling, thinking, and sensing are all interrelated components of complex action patterns. Our bodily attitudes are motoric behaviors that orient how we assemble and organize our complex actions. Helping Angela to differentiate her “new kind of chutzpah” would deepen her connections within and between all these components, as well as orient how she organizes them into her complex action pattern.

3) To develop more nuanced ways of relating to herself and to how she approaches her actions and interactions. By differentiating her “new kind of chutzpah,” Angela would begin to generate an inner somatic responsiveness and resiliency. This deepens self-contact and generates self-influence.

So I did it: “I like your attitude Angela. Let’s differentiate it, shall we?” I proposed.

“Oh sorry,” she exclaimed, “We can’t mess with my chutzpah!” I assured her that differentiating her “new kind of chutzpah” would not reduce or eliminate it but rather help her to generate more distinct kinds of chutzpah. It was not a matter of chutzpah or no chutzpah. It was a matter of degree: how much chutzpah, and what kind? This would give her more expression and choice within her personal experience. Angela pounded clearly and emphatically: “I’m in.”

Entering back into the dance of her involuntary and voluntary movements, this time she maintained the dynamic shape of her pounding, her “new kind of chutzpah,” and de-intensified it. She slowed down and formed a clear knocking. “This is useful,” Angela chided in her cheeky way. “Now I can knock and give them a warning before I go in and really pound on them.” Through differentiation, Angela could now make choices: to knock, to pound,

or to knock before pounding. This is useful not only in relation to others, but in relation to one's self as well.

The Final Differentiation for the Day

While maintaining her “knocking” Angela de-intensified it even further to make another distinct yet related action. As she made her gesture even slower and less intense, in midstream, she stopped and became very still. For fifteen seconds that lasted forever, neither of us moved. We were both in this silent, pulsing pause. It felt spacious and timeless, the space she had created. Angela suddenly and exuberantly threw her arms out toward me to give me a big hug, excitedly squirming in her wheelchair. She had never created this degree of quietude in herself before. It was remarkable.

Sustainability and “On the Fly” Applicability

The next time Angela came to see me, we both noticed how she was significantly and consistently calmer in her sitting. Her wiggling around was more like a gentle undulating than a jerking. She had been practicing catching her waves and differentiating their intensity all week—in her van, at work, at home. The effects of her practice were palpable and lasting. As for her chutzpah, she clearly still had it, but now she could experience and express it in more nuanced ways.

Angela has been able to use what she learned “on the fly,” in real time in her life. When she had to speak to a large group of people, she got nervous, and her spasticity increased. This made her even more nervous, and her initial reaction was to try to clamp down on her involuntary movements, which made her spasticity even stronger. Then she remembered our sessions, and instead of trying to control her spasticity through clamping down, she began to influence her involuntary movements by maintaining their dynamic shape and giving them more muscular form, more density. She could then slow down and vary the intensity of her efforting in distinct steps to form new waves—new ways of containing her excitement and managing her spasticity.

In Conclusion: Small Differentiations Make Big Differences

Considering differentiation from an anatomical perspective opens the door to another dimension of understanding how humans develop, grow, form, and function. With Angela, I applied this understanding not only to our hands-on work, but also to how she influences her own behaviors.

Helping Angela to differentiate her “new kind of chutzpah” gave her choices in how she physically orients and organizes herself for action. By creating novel behaviors which grew directly out of familiar ways of functioning, and toward what she was interested in forming, Angela was able to continue her learning over time and on her own. Most importantly, Angela began to develop an inner somatic responsiveness and resiliency which deepens her self-contact and informs how she relates to herself and others.



Sonja H. Sutherland, MA, GCFP (1997) is a Feldenkrais practitioner with 15 years of ongoing studies in Formative Psychology®. She maintains a private practice in Berkeley and teaches workshops and retreats in the US and Europe. Sonja holds a black belt in Aikido and a Masters in Dance.
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ⁱ One definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is: “to mark or show a difference in: constitute a different that distinguishes.” *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “differentiate,” accessed July 21, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/differentiate>.

ⁱⁱ “The normal process by which a less specialized cell develops or matures to become more distinct in form and function. . . . For example, a single-celled zygote develops into a multicellular embryo that further develops into a more complex multi-system of various cell types of a fetus. The cell size, shape, polarity, metabolism and responsiveness to signals change dramatically such that the less specialized cell becomes more specialized and acquires a more specific role.” *Biology Online*, s.v. “differentiation,” accessed July 21, 2015, <http://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Differentiation>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), pg. 33.