

Biological Optimism in Aligning the Vertical Weight-bearing Skeleton:

An Interview with Ruthy Alon

The following interview took place in October 2000 at a “Bones for Life” workshop in Santa Monica, California. Ruthy Alon spoke to Carol Lingman about how she developed the “Bones for Life” work and how it relates to the Feldenkrais Method®.

The interview was first published in The Feldenkrais Journal, No.15, Winter 2003. Permission has been granted to reproduce the article in this format.

CL: *Can you speak about how you came to create the **Bones for Life** program?*

Ruthy Alon: A relative of mine who is a medical doctor asked me, “Does the Feldenkrais Method® have something for osteoporosis?” He was quite overwhelmed by the amount of money being paid by insurance companies for osteoporosis damages. And beyond the money, people with breakable bones lose their freedom of movement and depend on others to take care of them.

When this medical doctor asked me that question, right away, I said, “No.” Our Awareness Through Movement® (ATM) lessons are transparent of pressure. They are a laboratory for refining coordination. Indirectly, of course, they serve to create an alignment that can sustain pressure. But we never put the pressure into practice in ATM. In Functional Integration® we do it, but usually not as an act for people to do on their own for themselves.

After I told him “no,” I went home and I thought about it. It was a challenge. Why couldn’t we provide the bones with their need for some dynamic impact of pressure—even though this is not the style that we usually use in our laboratory of learning? The essence of what we do is to awaken the brain, to lead the nervous system to find better solutions for movement.

I started to play with it, and I came up with many movement processes, all the time being aware that the main catch here is that if the alignment is not intact, the pressure of a dynamic movement can cause damage. I have heard from people teaching exercises in institutions for building bone density that they are very frustrated. They say if they do it as strong as it needs to be, then there are injuries. If they don’t do it strong, then it doesn’t build the bone. This is the dilemma.

I thought I could use Feldenkrais principles to apply pressure in safety. In *Bones for Life*, I use a lot of pushing into the wall in lying down, in sitting, and in standing. I use the hands pushing on the wall, which is a great contribution to integration, as pressure from the hands has been neglected since we moved from the original design of creatures in evolution—the walking on all fours. We miss all the information, the connection, from the hands through the shoulder blades to organize the upper back and throughout the rest of the body.

The objective is that the transmission of power will be able to go through the whole body from one end to the other without any loss and without getting caught in a specific joint. This needs to be developed within a dynamic, rhythmic, springy pace equivalent to the experience of walking in order for the organism to make use of it. A lot of the movements are in standing, and I use the wall in standing either from the back or the front. My main instrument is a cloth of seven meters length. We call it the Bones wrap. Even if the person is not well-organized, with this cloth wrapped around them, they are together, and they can jump safely. I have people, especially elderly people, who come to the workshops and have long ago forgotten the day they jumped, but pretty soon, they are all jumping! Jumping is the ultimate teacher of weight-bearing posture.

Actually the whole work is about alignment. Stimulating the growth of bone is the “bones” of the workshop. We get the alignment through a lot of different devices. For example, using our own hands as agents of orientation to organize the neck in a polarized movement, with the knuckle of the index finger bent in the mouth and pulling forward, while withdrawing the neck vertebrae backward, pushing against the fingers of the other hand. And of course, doing some movement in that position because no position will be valid unless we see ourselves utilizing that position in activity.

We create context for a position and we use it in movement that is in the pattern of walking. This is the movement that is best understood by the body. We tap into a lot of knowledge when we do the style and pattern and pace of walking—with the springiness, the alternation, the rhythmic pressure that is a streaming throughout the entire body. It is not a dry pressure. We know from research that too little pressure doesn’t stimulate the bone to become strong. But too much pressure can also create osteoporosis. This is the case when the lumbar area becomes eroded from too much static compression; even athletes who work too much with too few pauses are diagnosed with osteoporosis. You need to tune into the specific amount of pressure and be in a rhythm and configuration that will be something that the organism understands and recognizes as the clue for serving life in order to provide the bone with what it needs.

***CL:** What is the role of nutrition in strengthening bones? How do you address that in your program?*

Ruthy Alon: The bone needs nutrients in order to renew its cells. But the nutrients that we are absorbing into the system do not reach equally everywhere. It’s more difficult to penetrate into the firm tissues of the bones. So if the whole circulation is weak and slowing down, the bone is the first to be neglected in terms of getting the nutrients and the minerals that it needs.

The modern culture tries to solve the deficiency with chemical and mineral supplements, which might confuse the natural mechanism and actually weaken it. And without movement, there is no guarantee that they will be distributed to the bones. In fact, the calcium might accumulate in the blood vessels and make it even harder for the heart to pump circulation.

We know that a shaking or bouncing movement will help in this process. The dynamic movement opens the flow and makes the distribution of nutrients much more uniform. This is an aspect of vitality. It’s not a matter of aging. I always tell people, “Your bones will be as good as you use them.”

*CL: Do you encourage people to do the **Bones for Life** processes on their own, when they are at home or at work?*

Ruthy Alon: Yes, the processes that I use are very simple and people can be very successful using them. In my workshops, people are doing almost 100% of what I am teaching. It is quite amazing how people are standing after a lesson—all kinds of people, some are Feldenkrais teachers and some are people from the public who have problems. This is very encouraging. I want it to be simple and popular so people will be able to use it independently. I would like people to feel empowered to do it for themselves. This is what it is about.

Truly it is a lower approximation of precision than an Awareness Through Movement lesson, but then it might be easier to repeat. Unlike the Feldenkrais Method where learning happens as a revolutionary insight and can be adopted spontaneously into life, in the bone tissue work, repetition is crucial. And this is a problem because people don't like to do things themselves. They need to know that the teacher cares and sees what they are doing in order to be able to continue and do it all the time.

Moshe Feldenkrais used to say that human beings did not grow up to learn by themselves. There was always a witness. The learning period, the dependent period, is very long for human beings. We are cued to having somebody nearby. I encourage people to support each other so they will be able to practice on their own.

I have a few examples of people who have practiced on their own and who have measured their bone density before and after. There is a woman in Germany who had severe progression bone loss. After coming to a workshop, she practiced faithfully for five months, and her test showed a few percentage points higher in bone density. This is just the beginning. I hope that people will measure the results and then we can get some validation. We get it now subjectively from people—how they are standing and how they are feeling about it. Hopefully some scientists will do serious research using a control group so there will be an objective assessment too.

*CL: Can you say more specifically how the **Bones for Life** work relates to the ideas and practice of the Feldenkrais Method?*

Ruthy Alon: From a long time of doing Feldenkrais lessons lying on the floor, I felt something was missing. I really think that the Feldenkrais Method is a laboratory and to apply it in life, we need all of the natural activities. It's not a substitute for life. There is a lot of energy and joy and sense of power in doing the dynamic movement after you come prepared with some Feldenkrais experience. This is one thing. The other thing is that Feldenkrais thinking taught me how to be creative. In a way, for me, Feldenkrais is a workshop in creativity. The whole thing is how to come up with more and more solutions and resourcefulness.

I started by myself, looking for a movement that creates pressure, organic pressure, streaming pressure that involves the whole body but uses the perspective of integration, harmony, and natural configurations. Then I started to use a towel to substitute disorganized alignment, but it was too short. So I used a sheet, and finally I came to use a cloth of seven meters. That's where it stands now—I regard the cloth as a loan of integration. I use it in many other ways too. We form it into a turban and people

put it on their heads practicing what I call the “Water Carrier’s Walk” with a weight on the head, which is for both alignment and pressure. We make knots in the cloth and work with the back on the wall to articulate different parts of the spine in the context of a vertical walk.

I also include an introduction to lifting small weights and to falling because that is when osteoporosis can really manifest itself, when people fall down and break something. I use a lot of breathing and imagery. We do sphincter work and a lot of jumping and bouncing.

*CL: One of the phrases you use is “movement nature meant.” How does that manifest as a theme in the **Bones for Life** work?*

Ruthy Alon: That was the wisdom of Feldenkrais—to decipher patterns of movement that are refined and filtered by millions of years of evolution. When we use these organic patterns, we tap into a lot of knowledge and information. For example, I use the pattern of crawling on the belly—for me, this is the prototype, the alphabet of locomotion. I use it with one foot on the wall, which gives the opportunity to propel yourself one step forward. Just drawing your knee to the side like we do a lot in ATM is kind of preparation. The actual spring forward comes from straightening this knee—pushing the anchored foot into the ground and straightening the knee in the direction of the head. This is what gives the step. We get in touch with using that pressure with the help of the wall. The changes in the alignment after that and the capacity to bounce on the heels and feel the transmission of pressure from end to end is tremendous. The pressure is never a dry pressure like you see when people push something directly. It has to be in a form of a walking animal.

For some people, just to do a pendulum with the pelvis that is in rhythm like some part of walking is already a big thing. If we support it with a roller and let the pelvis roll from side to side in a wave principle or in a stick principle or in a canon principle, people begin to restore these old patterns and they discover this spontaneous pace and springiness in their bodies.

We don’t usually use rhythm in ATM, but I find that rhythm is a big lever in learning. If I have people getting up from a chair or rolling from lying down to sitting, I tell them to listen to the rhythm and to organize their movement in a smooth continuous pace. Once they master the rhythm, all the movement, all the coordination becomes much more harmonious and appropriate and proportional. So rhythm is a great means for learning. Jumping happens in rhythm. Dynamic walking has its own rhythm. Everyone has it very deep in them and we can make the contact with that center which is easy to follow and easy to maneuver.

CL: Your work includes a lot of self-touch for orientation. For example, what is the purpose of bringing your hands to the wall through contact with your body as opposed to just placing them there?

Ruthy Alon: A crucial issue is anti-gravity movement. How do we pick up our weight against gravity and lift it? How do we increase the pressure of the other parts? And how is the detachment done in the best way? The whole thing with the skeleton is outsmarting

gravity. In this game there are many, many variations as to how we can do that intelligently.

For many people, the concept of sliding contact toward detachment is new. It brings quite a refinement and another quality to our dealing with gravity. The sliding contact metaphor is that of the airplane as opposed to the direct detachment of a helicopter. This enables us to not lose orientation and to sensitively and gradually refine the assignment of anti-gravity detachment.

We have a Feldenkrais process where we lie on the floor on our back and put the palm of the hand flat on the floor beyond the head with the elbow up. This is very difficult for many people. They get frustrated. Of course they improve. But when we put the hand on the wall while lying on the back, we eliminate 90 degrees of the difficulty. Still it is not always easy to get the hand to the wall. If we go to the wall with sliding contact of the hand, not losing contact with the body, it comes there much more easily and much more simply than if we just move it through the air. It's a device to make the movement simpler and more efficient.

If it is still difficult for a person to have the hand fully on the wall, I support the heel of the hand which does not reach the wall with some substance so the person will still have the sensation of some pressure from the hand and will be able to organize the whole body from the hand, retrieving the effect of walking on all fours. We are manipulating the environment to meet people on their own terms so they can experience the function that the process offers. This is totally a Feldenkrais idea. It's what we sometimes do in Awareness Through Movement and do a lot in Functional Integration.

CL: What kinds of adjustments do you make for people who have not worked much with their bodies?

Ruthy Alon: If you give them simple movements, they will do something. It will just take longer. We come from the starting point that people are learning creatures. This is the task of the teacher—to inspire people and to show them that they succeed. For example, there was a woman in the workshop today who said, “I cannot fall on the floor.” So I built a barricade, a few layers of pillows for support and I told her to sit down on that. She sat and got up several times, every time I took away one layer of the support. She came to sit on the floor and do the slow motion of falling. It was amazing. People are learning creatures. This is Feldenkrais.

CL: We are learning creatures, but sometimes we don't know we have learned something. How do we make it our own so we can come back to it? You spoke about this learning as being like “capital in the bank.” How do we make that capital work for us?

Ruthy Alon: I say that your asset is your talent to create the capital, but not the capital itself. Anyhow, I feel we are so generous in the Feldenkrais Method to create such good results, but we don't always take the profit from them. There are some incredible sensations that happen at the end of the lesson. But if people don't do anything with them, they will just pass as a nice episode and they will forget it and not remember how to create it again for themselves.

Of course, you can always go through the process again, but people don't always know how to do that. So I put special attention to notice the sensation at the end of the lesson and spend some time with it. Listen to the sensation and picture it both in standing and walking. Feel the atmosphere of it. Visualize the alignment. Figure out the social expression of it. Give it a name. That will make it more available as capital, your asset, and you can come back to afterward just by recalling the name. It can be a short cut to the final product in a way that does not come from theory but from your own experience. It is difficult to define the resulting gestalt. It's not in the department of words. It's in the sensation. We need to learn to talk that language. Like Moshe told us, "Think in movement." We need to think in sensations.

CL: One of the terms that you use is "biological optimism." What do you mean by that?

Ruthy Alon: I notice that there is a lot of good feeling during the workshop and also after the workshop. I know that technology can invent all kinds of substitutes like eyeglasses and hearing aids, but there is one thing they cannot substitute and that is the joy that comes from independent movement. There is a direct connection between the quality of your autonomous movement and your mood. When people can experience that they can walk springy and their body is behind them, I call this joy "biological optimism."

Ruthy Alon graduated from the first training of Moshe Feldenkrais in Tel Aviv in 1969. She is the author of *Mindful Spontaneity* and creator of the video *Movement Nature Meant*. Using her forty years of living the Feldenkrais Method® she has responded to the demonstrated need for ways to keep regenerating the vitality of the bone tissue by creating the *Bones for Life* program.

Carol Lingman is a Guild-Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner and a Bones for Life trainer. She practices in Sonoma, California.

For information on Bones for Life workshops and video/print materials, contact Gretchen Langner, 87 Pine St., Portland, Maine 04102; (207) 774-9685; langnerdzn@gwi.net.