

# FELDENKRAIS AUSTRALIA

Journal of the Australian Feldenkrais Guild Inc.

2021



**THE GROUND WITHIN  
A LESSON IN RESILIENCE  
ACKNOWLEDGING COUNTRY  
FROM THE GROUND WE CAME**



## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

By Shona Lee

Ground proved to be a very fertile theme for this edition of the AFG Journal....

The layers to Ground that our authors explore in this publication include:

Ground being dependable, a lesson in resilience; what it means to stand one's ground and the resonance it brings to your voice (quite literally, not only as a metaphor). The ground being key for skeletal organization; along with the mind-boggling realization that the so-called 'solidity' of the ground, is actually in constant motion, as we spin through the solar system. Personal practices of connecting with the physical ground of earth, outdoors in nature; how we come from the ground and that Ground can also be found within.

Understanding the importance of ground was a profound turning point in my Functional Integration skillset as a new practitioner. Of course, this key

concept had been emphasized all along, but you *hear* it when it's meaning is ready to be meaningful to you.....! For me this came whilst attending a workshop on working with children with special needs; the exercise was to *bring* the ground or *give* ground, that was it, so simple. And boom goes the epiphany - all we have to do is give ground and the nervous system has what it needs to recalibrate / unwind! Obviously an oversimplification, you start with ground and expand the learning from there, but such a super solid, absolutely essential place to start...

We end this edition on Ground with an Acknowledgement of Country – sharing different forms it could take, for how we might incorporate this dimension of what Ground/Country means into our classes / workshops. Normally this would come at the beginning, however I wanted it to be last thing that was remembered. A bit upside down perhaps, but so is Terra Australis –on a world map! With firm ground beneath you, you have the liberty to be playful.

### THE EDITOR

*Shona Lee (SEAUS1, 2018) practices in Sydney – www.movingintune.com  
One of Shona's greatest joys is discovering NEW ground. It's only relatively recently that she has come to appreciate the value of consolidating on ground for foundational integrity; in the ongoing ventures of life, growth and the people we come in contact with.*

## ABOUT FELDENKRAIS AUSTRALIA

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The theme for our 2022 issue is 'Image in Action' – contributions are invited.

Please address all correspondence to the editor,  
**Email:** [nationalnewsletter@feldenkrais.org.au](mailto:nationalnewsletter@feldenkrais.org.au)



## EMBODIED MOVEMENT & FELDENKRAIS AS A WAY OF ARTICULATING A SOMATIC PRACTICE

By Robyn Phelan

An adolescent passion and ability for elite competitive basketball has left my adult knees minus anterior cruciate ligaments with a few millimetres of cartilage plus busted finger joints. To add insult to physical injury, my immune system has decided that my joints are an aggressive enemy to be attacked. A diagnosis of Rheumatoid Arthritis confirmed that my pain levels and tiredness were not female hysteria nor menopausal paranoia. Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease that causes pain and swelling of the joints. Our body's immune system exists to fight off infections. Having an autoimmune disease such as RA, means that my immune system is confused in its role of protector and targets the lining of my joints, causing inflammation and joint damage. My particular RA affects hands and feet. Interestingly, or cruelly, these are the parts of my body most required for an art practice that works with clay and responds to working across different sites. A weekly dose of chemicals knocks out my immune system saving my joints from further destruction. To manage RA and my longstanding injuries, a daily commitment to gentle,

mindful exercise has saved not only my mental health but it has empowered my body's ability to sense itself in space. This routine has become a conduit to my somatic practice of embodied art making.

Imagine you have nothing better to do in this day other than experience this moment.

*Ingrid Weisfelt, Feldenkrais teacher*

The opening quote from a class recorded by my Feldenkrais teacher and dear friend Ingrid Weisfelt.

I began Feldenkrais lessons at Ingrid's concerned encouragement and under her direct tutelage to manage my Rheumatoid Arthritis once medication had stabilised the condition. The Feldenkrais Method is a universal method for improving human life through better movement, sensation, posture and breathing. As an exercise therapy it was devised by Israeli Moshé Feldenkrais, (1904–1984) during the mid-20th century. Neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to reorganise synaptic connections after injury, is central to the

effectiveness of the Feldenkrais Method. Trained practitioners use touch, movement, guided imagery and mindful body awareness to stimulate the brain to make useful and lasting improvements to movement and posture. Ingrid began this training after suffering her own injury when she was an international dancer with Meryl Tankard's Australian Dance Theatre and Tanztheater Basel. Feldenkrais is used by performing and creative artists by making, 'small and subtle changes in movement habits that make a big difference to your confidence, quality and safety in performance and repetitive actions.'

[Feldenkrais ref: <https://www.feldenkrais.org.au/the-feldenkrais-method> & <https://www.feldenkrais.org.au/feldenkrais-for-performers>]

When listening to one of Ingrid's pre-recorded lessons, it was her voice, her gentle persuading and importantly her specific instructions that informed how my body could heal itself by finding new ways of sensing, feeling around and through arthritic pain and injury. During the intense focus of one particular session, it occurred to me that Ingrid's mode of instruction, her choice of words, articulate how I approach my ceramic practice. In the mindful state of a session, I find myself drifting and dreaming, imagining and planning possible

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art projects. Ingrid's voice would soon pull me back into my body and through my breath.

A necessary shift in practice was required during the Covid-19 pandemic and especially into Melbourne's second lockdown, where our movements were restricted to a five-kilometre radius from our home and no more than one hour of outside recreation per day. This pandemic winter brought a deeper attention to my immediate surrounding as repetitive visits to local parks occurred over the many, many months. On these walks I applied the instructional affirmations of Ingrid's lessons to a new body of ceramic work.



To quote from Ingrid's instructions, '...be curious about what happens... to do whatever you need to find the possibility'. My tacit approach to material and site is an embodied movement flowing in and out of what I feel, sense, think and do. This interior process or flow of decision making is subtle, fleeting and perhaps beyond written language. And yet, in Ingrid's instructions, I find a clarity of language and direction that corresponds with how my consciousness responds to the activity of making. I wondered hesitantly if I could quote and apply her words to a creative writing piece. She was curious and delightfully gave her permission to do so. Following this preface is the resulting creative

writing piece. I directly transcribed a lesson of Ingrid's recorded live in Melbourne in 2019, capturing the key terms that relate to how my practice unfolds in my imagination. This piece articulates how a tacit art practice responds to a deep understanding of my body, an intimate attention to site, and my skill and material awareness of clay. Alongside Ingrid's words I have intersected my field notes written after collecting clay impressions through compression from a Black Wattle tree in Royal Park Melbourne for use as source material for sculptural work in July 2020.

*Robyn*



Robyn is an extraordinary ceramicist, educator, explorer and discoverer. Throughout the time I have known her she has weathered events that have caused her much physical and emotional pain, and that have threatened a diminished experience of life, love and creative expression. As clouds darkened familiar pathways, Robyn went searching and found cracks of light. Then with an incredible amount of self-compassion, wisdom, and insight, she turned these cracks into rays of warmth, creativity and possibility. Like the trees she draws inspiration from, she found the ground beneath her, sending deep roots to receive back nourishment, support and new growth for her creative practice. It's been an absolute pleasure walking alongside her in her artistic journey and a constant reminder of the beauty, simplicity and profound impact that a practice in the Feldenkrais Method can have.

*Ingrid*

Imagine you have nothing better to do in this day other than experience this moment

*my bike skims across the hard and impervious streets  
contained within the five-kilometre radius of the inner city  
bitumen, concrete, bluestone, and tram lines  
I have no physical connection with this land, my early morning immersion is all atmospheric and cerebral  
a bracing breeze stings  
the tip of my nose and fingertips  
winter is brisk, icy, scent-less  
like opening a freezer door  
no mask for bike riding, no-one has breathed this air  
recently  
my breath is getting deeper and heavier now  
my heart beats in syncopation with the pedestrian crossing alarm as I cross into  
Royal Park  
immediately I smell the scent of eucalyptus  
I hear lorikeets  
and scan for Black Wattle*

you have this time  
where you can start to explore for yourself  
your own body and your own movement  
in your own way  
there is no expectation  
there is no right or wrong  
you are seeking light, easy, soft movement,  
smooth connected movement through your whole body  
in your way

## EMBODIED MOVEMENT & FELDENKRAIS AS A WAY OF ARTICULATING A SOMATIC PRACTICE *By Robyn Phelan*

*I am now on foot, walking, scanning for the feathery fronds that indicate Black Wattle  
looking for the lime green pods that are yet to burst into bloom*

as you are quietly sensing and feeling through your body  
bring your attention to how your breath feels inside your body  
perhaps you can sense a slight shift, a rise, a fall, an opening, a closing

*standing quiet  
I connect to the ground through my feet  
acknowledge this place, sovereign land, Wurundjeri land  
use soft eyes and deep attention to see and sense what the engagement will be at this time  
use soft eyes to caress leaf tips, filigree twigs, sweeping branches, robust trunk, and buried root  
the place I will work with is found  
unpack prepared coils of clay*

notice what happens if?  
how does the weight shift?  
if you move one part of you, how does the rest of you respond?  
pause for a moment

*white porcelain, perfectly plastic and malleable  
cold and damp yet willing to respond to my hand movements  
compress a piece of clay into a form that can be received by the tree*

play around a little bit  
how can you do this movement differently?  
allow  
how does this change your contact with?  
flatten



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*place the clay onto the tree that calls my attention  
here is a knot, a piece of bark, and growth lines  
hold my left palm flat against the clay surface  
tap fingertips to flatten clay against the tree body*

and then keep still  
what do you need to do to the centre of yourself?

*is this flattening enough to secure, even momentarily, the clay to the tree?*

rest for a moment  
notice what impact this has had on

*the body of the tree  
the porcelain clay has become as one with the branch  
the white material alludes to a bandage  
has there been an injury?*

*no  
care and attention has been paid to this application*

continue with same exploration  
start to play a little bit with all the different ways you can manipulate or change  
while keeping the same movement  
roll, lift, feel what you need to do





## EMBODIED MOVEMENT & FELDENKRAIS AS A WAY OF ARTICULATING A SOMATIC PRACTICE *By Robyn Phelan*

*consider the correspondence between my body and the branch surface  
use knuckles to press along the clay length  
watch how the clay spreads and reaches away from this compressive action*

what impact does this have on  
softening and folding  
look for ease and softness not correctness  
it is not about the range of the movement but about the quality of the movement

*pay attention to the action and experience  
I see rhythmic indentations that tell the story of my movement across the porcelain  
these indexical marks ripple like the surface of water furrowed by wind  
does this tree ripple also  
tickled by the cold clay against its skin?*

imagine you have nothing better to do in this day other than experience this moment

*gently peel the stretched clay away from the tree surface  
peeled like a skin  
a sheath of bark in simulation*

be curious about what happens

*see the language of the tree surface collected by the clay  
it is an embossed language like a Rosetta Stone  
observe the indexical record of this compressive correspondence on both sides of the clay surface  
an intimate and gentle conversation*



## EMBODIED MOVEMENT & FELDENKRAIS AS A WAY OF ARTICULATING A SOMATIC PRACTICE *By Robyn Phelan*

rest

*take up more clay pieces  
look for another surface that calls for your attention*

do this movement many, many times  
sense your contact with  
this moment

*this time  
keep this piece on the tree  
add and accumulate more pieces of compressed clay  
along the outreaching branch*

sense what changes in your body  
how can you soften and find possibility?  
shift, fold, arch, roll, reach  
to do whatever you need to find the possibility  
keep your breath soft  
your belly soft  
work within a small range  
do less and feel more  
as you send this force

*from my feet, through my body, along my arms, into my hands and fingers  
and down and through the clay*

how does your body respond?  
how do you track this force that you are generating?  
how can you shift, move, and organise to make this a glorious, fluid, constant movement?

## EMBODIED MOVEMENT & FELDENKRAIS AS A WAY OF ARTICULATING A SOMATIC PRACTICE *By Robyn Phelan*

*my body pushes  
my hands work in small movements  
not quite a rhythm but in connection to how the clay spreads across the surface of the tree trunk*

*All my clay has been applied to two adjacent tree boughs  
like outstretched arms the tree has received and holds the clay tablets*

rest  
you are resting but your mind is scanning, sensing, feeling, noticing  
differences  
this is where all the learning is happening  
stay with this quiet and internalised focus, notice  
  
what is happening in the middle of yourself?  
is it clearer, simpler?  
is there something that your body learnt?

*I gently collect these tablets of clay  
try not to damage the intimate trace of correspondence  
pack pannier  
ride back to studio  
reengage, reimagine, reframe this experience*

*I turn to farewell the tree  
as I leave  
a trace of porcelain has remained on the branches  
dried now to pure white  
the ghostly remnants of our conversation*



You can find out more about Robyn's beautiful art at:  
<https://www.robynphelan.com.au/>

Ingrid's Dancers Series can be found at:  
[https://www.melbournefeldenkraisstudio.com/  
Melbourne\\_Feldenkrais\\_Studio/Home.html](https://www.melbournefeldenkraisstudio.com/Melbourne_Feldenkrais_Studio/Home.html) ■