

Shelly

Candy Conino

“I gave her your name and number, but I don’t see what you could possibly DO with her”, said the mother of another child with whom I was working.

Based on this reluctant referral, Shelly, perfectly coifed, impeccably dressed, and escorted by her attentive mother, shuffled in for a “visit”. We had agreed to one session, during which we would all assess each other. It went very well. Martha, Shelly’s mother, did all the talking, since twenty year old Shelly was nonverbal. Shelly had been diagnosed with autism before she was a year old. She had never communicated at all. She had not been able to establish even a yes/no system. Her doctors estimated that her intelligence level was equal to that of a two month old infant.

Shelly was engrossed by her interior world, and fascinated with the tiny orb of space surrounding her hands. She was clearly enjoying her precious world, and would lash out or hit anyone who tried to contact her. In fact, her mother hoped that I could help with the hitting problem, since changing, and dressing her had become an ordeal. Feeding her was no problem, especially if it involved dessert.

Martha assisted Shelly to sit on my table, and stayed with us during the session. Shelly was delightful, smiling and seemingly listening as I explained Feldenkrais work to her. I confidently led her through a body scan and then used my hands to help her clarify the differences in the two sides of her pelvis on the seat, and her feet on the floor. I sat beside her, knelt in front of her, worked from behind her, all to link her internal sense, the external sense from my hands, and my voice together in some sensible and non-threatening way. She became more relaxed, let her hands rest on her lap, and never once tried to hit me. Her mother was thrilled, I was comfortable, and we agreed to weekly sessions.

The next week Shelly and her mother arrived with great enthusiasm. Martha mentioned that she had talked to Shelly about this from time to time during the week, and always my name elicited a smile. I asked Martha to make herself comfortable in another room, because I would like Shelly and me to focus only on each other. Martha was perfectly happy to relax for an hour, and left Shelly and me standing in the middle of my room. I invited her to my table, and, since she had never responded to a direction or a request in her life, I was comfortable with her non-response. I moved toward her, to assist her to my table, and she backed up toward it. I moved again from a different angle, and she backed up again. I talked to her about this magic, and we played with it a bit, her moving a little right, a little left, in response to my forward move. I talked to her about noticing her response, while she enjoyed her hands. It was fun, until she was close enough to the table to sit down. As I talked to her about sitting

and moved toward her to assist, she instead turned around and stepped up onto the table. Oooooops!

She was standing close to the left end of the table, facing me. She was also smiling triumphantly. She was no longer focused on her hands, but had turned her head to the right, sliding her eyes to the far left to look at me. My instinctive reaction was to reach out to her, but that made her balance shift backward, and if she were to take a step back, she would fall off the table. I felt that I had to be close enough to her to prevent her from harm, but how to get close enough?

As Feldenkrais practitioners, we learn to “meet the client where they are”. So I did. I stood up on the table with her, facing the same direction. I tried to turn and face her, but that inspired her to step further from me. So we stood there, she and I, for 50 minutes. I tried the body scan again, but there was no response. I tried to get closer to her again, but there was that troublesome stepping in the wrong direction. Finally, I talked to her about the way I was feeling. I explained that part of our work was to distinguish her boundaries, what was her, what was outside of her, and the nature of her power to affect the inside and the outside (this, of course was a moot point by then). After 50 minutes, I advised her that I was getting a little panicked. For me, it could be a bad scene if her mom came down the hall, found us both standing motionless on the table, looking off into some unknown horizon, and clearly without an obvious strategy for dismounting. I told her about how awful and awkward that moment would feel, inside me, and that on top of that I would have to ask her mom to pay me, and then I would have to look Martha in the eye and ask her if she would like to schedule another appointment. I told Shelly that if we were going to work together long term then we needed to figure out a way to relate so that this would never happen again. We would need to listen carefully to each other’s cues, and take turns being in charge. I told her that I was going to hold out my hand, and wait for her to take it, and then we would sit down on the table together. She smiled, took my hand, and her mom found us sitting on the table together. I advised Shelly’s mother that the doctors were wrong about her intellect, and that we had agreed to work hard together.

Shelly and I spent most of the first six months exploring our relationship in space. She never again agreed to enter my teaching room, but would sit or lie down in various other rooms and spaces, or wander about my house when she felt the need to rest. She very quickly established the space, which we named the “limited access room.” Her settling down there meant (and still does today!) that her tolerance to touch was miniscule. For many weeks, she offered me her back only, and turned away if I moved even the tiniest bit to her side or front. At first she would not be touched anywhere with my hands. She would get up and walk away, or have a temper tantrum, or lash out at me. I remembered reading about Temple Grandon. She invented a hugging machine because she could feel calm and think more clearly if she felt a uniform pressure around her. So

Shelly and I made great progress working with our backs touching each other, and later my front to her back, my legs interacting with her legs and pelvis, and slowly over many weeks introducing my forearms onto her sides, and finally my hands into the space that her hands occupied.

I was very interested in using my hands to touch her, and she was very alert and resistant to my goal. One day I was sitting behind her, with my arms and legs surrounding her, both of us having reached a giggling exhaustion by “butt walking” forward and backward, watching our hands flap about in response. I asked her to put her hand in my hand. As I mentioned, she had not ever followed a direction, except that awkward first session that she spent standing on my table. So I asked, and she ignored me. It seemed, though, that she was processing my request. So I waited. I remained motionless, waiting for a long five minutes. Her mom watched for five long minutes, until Shelly simply put her hand in mine.

Shelly and I spent many sessions after that working on the concept of conversation. Every lesson was first focused on establishing response choices. For example, how many choices could we establish for movements, which could communicate, “Don’t touch me”? How many movements could communicate, “I’m finished for today”? What options were there for signaling a need for a rest? She gradually developed a repertoire of communication skills, which did not rely solely on hitting or scratching. We slowly moved into more complex and proactive responses to questions like, “What will we do together today?”

At the same time, I started to read poetry to her, during her rest or “hands off” periods. This was intended to spark an appreciation of language in her. It was also intended to serve my next teaching project, rhythm and pacing. At that point Shelly had a wider variety of responses, but one could still wait five minutes for it to appear. While that worked in a Feldenkrais lesson, I explained to her that in the real world, other people would continue to assume that she was unable to comprehend well enough to respond. I had learned the value of musical or drumming/tapping rhythms while working with other young people, so I used those during our lessons along with the poetic rhythms during the rest. We discovered that she could respond quickly if the movements or questions were molded into a set of 17 or 21 beats. We started there and very gradually expanded her rhythmical repertoire to smaller and faster sets of beats.

Once she could feel the rhythm in various kinds of questions and directions I started to focus our lessons specifically on response time and leadership. At the beginning of each session, she could make a choice about which one of us would be in charge first. One of us would lead, one of us would follow. This taught her a lot about power and change. The person who was the follower was allowed to take over whenever she chose. The former leader would have to relinquish the lesson leadership and begin to follow.

Shelly went to a couple of workshops on facilitated communication. She started to work with a local teacher and I went to observe and assess how my lessons could support her work with this teacher. When I saw what was going on, we started a series of fundamental lessons on reaching, since moving her hand to the keyboard was a colossal struggle for the communications teacher. At last she could reach the keyboard without a struggle, but she would only type meaningless (to us) sequences of words. She wasn't saying anything. That started us on a series of walking lessons, each one evoking a different style. We had to weave these back into our beginning lessons about choices, until she finally accepted that she had a choice about what parts of her she could express through her writing.

The stories about Shelly go on. I had more dismal failure lessons with her, and lots of brilliant lessons with her, and some boring and mediocre lessons as well. But, three years after we began our work together, Shelly had learned to communicate by typing. This was the first message she sent to me:

Lot fire
Move my body you get near my joy
Love lot

Shelly

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