

The Story of Hanna; an amazing child with cerebral palsy

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Hanna and her parents had arrived at our advanced training in Austin on a rainy morning. The mother, Christina, smiled and attempted to keep Hanna engaged with smiles and songs. The little girl had a light mahogany complexion, like her mother, and soft curls. Even though this little daughter, having been deprived of oxygen at birth, was clearly not moving normally, she could momentarily focus her eyes, and for that short time she was present.

The day Hanna was brought to class she appeared to be an infant even though she was two years old. Cyndi, my Feldenkrais colleague from Texas, had been working with the child for six months at the clinic where she was employed.

“Every person needs to be able to feed themselves, dress themselves, and attend to their own bathroom needs in order to have a minimum quality of life,” Cyndi said, “and Hanna isn't able to bring her flailing hands to her mouth.”

The young couple hoped that Mia Segal who had been Moshe Feldenkrais' assistant in Israel for many years and had fifty years of experience as a Feldenkrais practitioner could help Hannah. Mia, with her daughter, Leora Gaster, had compassionately arranged to work with the little girl several times a day for four days of the workshop while our group of thirty students watched.

They used the Functional Integration method where developmental movement patterns are introduced to a person's nervous system where they reorganize and integrate with the movement already present. Many times I had watched patiently as a master Feldenkrais practitioner gave Functional Integration lessons to adults, but I had never experienced this remarkable method being used with a young child.

Leora started on that first morning by softly repeating Hannah's name. I remember thinking, *There is so little to work with*. As the child lay on a soft blanket, she was a limp curved line with no bending at the joints, and no eye contact. She seemed uncomfortable and whimpered in low tones as we gathered around. There was a quiet reverence in the room; I think we collectively knew that even a so-called damaged girl has a way back to herself.

Leora began to give Hanna a sense of her hands, arms, and chest by gently touching them with short, light strokes, gradually increasing the length so as to connect them in one long line while she sang, “Hanna, this is you - Hanna, this is you.” The session progressed quickly with the raising of both arms above her head, and movement being introduced directly on the lower spine, while the child cooed with the movement and whined when Leora didn't move her fast enough. Hanna's graceful mother sat on a mat close by, and when her daughter grew tired and began to fuss, she picked her up and took her back to their room where the little girl slept for several hours.

The next morning as Leora began to work with Hanna, it was clear that the little girl was stronger and didn't look like a baby anymore. The first thing I noticed was the extension in her legs as she pushed against the floor with her feet. She wanted to stand, but Leora knew that she would need more pieces of the developmental puzzle before the child could manage such a feat. Moving her small skeleton in the many different sequences that were so familiar to the

group, Leora told us that she was making Hanna aware of her ableness. Hanna's appetite for this information was enormous, but eventually she grew tired and session two ended.

Leora had been a young child growing up in Israel when Moshe Feldenkrais was developing his method with her mother, Mia Segel. Moshe became a close family friend, tutoring Leora in mathematics and science and including her in his movement experiments. Leora had been raised and steeped in the method.

In the dining hall at lunch, the young family sat at a table with Mia. Soon our attention was drawn to Hanna, who Mia had placed in her own lap. She moved the girl from her spine, integrating flexion, extension, and diagonal movement through her attentive nervous system. I watched for a while and then turned back to my lunch. When my gaze returned to the pair, Hanna was sitting upright in Mia's lap and was leaning on her elbows which were on the table in front of her. Across the table sat Hannah's father in tears.

What we witnessed was not a miracle. A child's nervous system has a plasticity that easily and quickly allows change and learning. The movement was already within Hanna; it is part of our human heritage, and Leora and Mia were only reminding her nervous system that it was there. In the days remaining, we saw Leora and Mia working together to introduce more movement patterns.

One day Leora moved Hanna to a supported sitting position and began to move her pelvis in a rocking motion. Mia folded Hanna's arms, pulled her forearms forward, and placed them on the floor. Together they were showing her how to crawl. They focused on showing her who she was in relation to the floor, which the child had never experienced before. She was becoming independent. A highlight occurred when she turned her head left and then right and reached left and then right for her father's camera. On the last day as we all sat close together in a circle, Hannah turned her head and looked directly at Mia and waited for her to touch her, to move her.

Moshe used the obscure Jewish word, *schichloul*, in naming his best-known book: *Awareness Through Movement*, but its meaning was lost in translation. *Schichloul* means improvement in the elegant way a master craftsman hones his skill, an endless journey toward perfection. In Austin I saw *schichloul* everywhere: in the determined eyes of a little girl, in the knowledgeable hands of a mother and daughter, and in the commitment to learning of the students.