

'Horizons of Understanding'¹

Re-discovering a phenomenological epoché with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

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In January 2014, three Feldenkrais trainers and scholars, Roger Russell, Ulla Schläfke, and Jeff Haller, collaborated with phenomenologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone to create a seminar on the Feldenkrais Method and philosophy in Yachats² on the Oregon coast. Prior to the seminar, lengthy email correspondences among the participants paved the way for our study. Already in November 2013, Roger Russell pointed us to “Gadamer’s hermeneutics and the necessity of recognizing each individual’s limited horizon of understanding.” (R. Russell, personal communication, November 17, 2013). I was intrigued to learn more about other people’s limited horizons of understanding and to further recognize and expand my own. Understanding grows with experience, as do skill, knowledge, and intuition.

Upon seeing the email from Roger, I tiptoed up to the top shelf of my studio library to bring down the pale green covered book, *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1979). The book brought vivid memories of old Gadamer with his grounded stature and resonant presence. Phenomenologists from London, New York and across the world had gathered to hear Gadamer’s elegant commentary at the big round table in the spacious seminar room of the Goethe-Institut, London, April 1986. During the discussion, Gadamer showed us how all humans have limited or expanded horizons of understanding in their lives. Two exceptional examples were given: one with an expanded horizon of understanding -- Ghandi, and the other who had an unfortunate and limited horizon of understanding – Hitler.

Hermeneutics & Reversibility ... London 1983, the Irish Republican Army bombing

Gadamer’s presentation at the Goethe-Institut took place towards the end of my three years’ study in London (1983-1986), While learning hermeneutics, I also deepened my understanding

¹ Gadamer, H.-G. (1979), *Truth and Method* (2nd ed). (Trans. by Sheed & Ward) London: Sheed & Ward. (original work published 1965)

² **Yachats** (/ˈjɑːhɑːts/ *YAH-hahts*) is a small coastal city in [Lincoln County](#), Oregon, United States. According to *Oregon Geographic Names*, the name comes from the [Siletz](#) language and means "dark water at the foot of the mountain". There is a range of differing etymologies, however.^[8] [William Bright](#) says the name comes from the [Aalsea](#) placename *yáχaykʷ* (IPA: /ˈjɑχajkʷ/).

^[9]

of the Feldenkrais and Taiji principle of Reversibility, briefly described as the potential to change directions and move in whatever way is appropriate in the moment.³

One day I was on the ground floor of Harrods, the well known department store in Knightsbridge, London. While admiring warm winter gloves, I suddenly felt an impulse to see the library and its books. In an instance of reversibility, I found myself dashing from the glove department to the library on the top floor. Why did I move so quickly, so suddenly? My arrival at the library, moments before a bomb exploded in the glove department downstairs, saved my life. It was Christmas 1983, and the Irish Republican Army bomb went off in the glove department moments after I left.

There, in the library, I remained for a long afternoon until we were given permission to leave the building. During that time, a camaraderie began to form among the dozen of us who were required to wait. I listened to stories from survivors of the earlier war years. The resilience and courage they portrayed were profound examples of reversibility; many knew how to turn in the right direction to survive the war time challenges.

When given permission to leave, each person walked slowly, steadily, and with consideration, as we descended Harrods' wide, spiralling staircase to the outside. That grand staircase and our movement together brought a definite sense of the group as a whole. A resonance had developed through our shared experience: in the midst of our long delay in Harrods that day, a gentle trust grew among us. Each person moved with an agile awareness of the others, turning or waiting as appropriate while we departed. It was reversibility, and also thinking in movement.⁴

Three decades later, I embraced the reversible aspects of Thinking In Movement to discover fresh moments with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and my Feldenkrais colleagues at Yachats. I had met Ms. Sheets-Johnstone fleetingly already; vividly I remembered the glow from those sunny days at the 2004 Feldenkrais Method annual conference in Seattle. At the pre-conference research symposium, "Movement and the Sense of Self," Ms. Sheets-Johnstone had presented to a standing ovation. Her book, *The Primacy of Movement* (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999), became a pivotal reference for my Feldenkrais practice during the following years.

Meeting Maxine Sheets-Johnstone once again ... "movement is our mother tongue"

Ms Sheets-Johnstone walked into the room; a tiny person she was. She placed her hand in the hand of the person nearest her. Her gesture was accompanied by the crackling sound of wild fresh ocean waves rushing onto the shore behind the adjacent building. Maxine placed her other hand in the hand of the next person. There was a hush of excitement in the room. Maxine

³ "When we move in Tai Chi, we always step with an 'empty step.' In this way of moving, there is no momentum. This could also be described as a quality of reversibility in movement; we could change direction." (Rabke, 2010)

⁴ "Thinking in Movement" is the title of Chapter 12 in *Primacy of Movement* (1st edition 1999, expanded 2nd edition 2011) by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. SEE REFERENCES.

swayed a little this way and that way, her long braid tossing from side to side down her slender back. Slowly Maxine welcomed each of us with a smile, one by one, gesturing that we were to take the hand of someone nearby. Soon we were weaving along in a slowly moving chain, our hands linking us together around the room's circumference. We moved like a shiny satin ribbon, a ribbon of thinking in movement.

Later Ms Sheets-Johnstone began to talk with us. With each minute, each hour, the discussion grew. Drawing us into a dance both kinetic and verbal, Maxine showed us how we are aware of our bodies: "Mindful bodies are the way in which we come into the world. It ties into the fact that movement is our mother tongue." (Prenzel & Sheets-Johnstone, 2010, p.4)

Maxine fostered our camaraderie in subtle ways, bringing an ethic to how we moved in the group. Moving without speaking that first morning encouraged each of us to find our own momentum. Maxine also fostered our autonomy, giving us a gradual sequence of exercises to discover new possibilities in our movement. Throughout the weekend, she showed us how to attend more and more closely to our ever-changing experience. Also working on our own, each of us developed a measure of self-determination, independence, and freedom.

I was surprised by my newly developed autonomy early one morning by the ocean! The rising sun found me at the edge of a magnificent cliff above the turbulent Oregon coast. The waves were roaring below and the wind was powerful at my back. Sinking into my Taiji (Tai chi) practice, absorbed in the nuances of balancing in the wind amongst the big rocks, the Taiji form began to unfold. As I stepped out with a line of 'cloud hands', curved towards a 'grasp bird's tail', I found myself completely alone in the Taiji movements. Yet, I was clearly supported by the wind. I leaned back into the wind almost in a daze, as if I could settle right there on the crest of the wind and even float into sleep. The Taiji movements arose in folds, around the edges of the wind. No longer balancing or being balanced, I felt the essence of autonomy: steady on my feet and meeting each moment as it appeared.

A kinetic intelligence is forging its way in the world, shaping and being shaped by the developing dynamic patterns in which it is living. Thus again we see that possibilities at any given moment do not stand out as so many recourses of action; possibilities are adumbrated [*overshadowed*] in the immediacy of the evolving situation itself, a situation that moment by moment opens up a certain world and certain kinetic ways of being in that world." (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 489; 2011, p. 424)

“Discovering what is invariantly there”

The second morning, Ms. Sheets-Johnstone invited us to sneeze in a variety of ways: loud, soft, steady, staccato, muffled, free, restrained, tentative, hearty. Bringing awareness to ourselves moving as we sneezed, fostered the “possibility of discovering what is invariantly there in any felt experience of movement.” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 143) Maxine's study of the sneeze included the Feldenkrais element of non-habitual movement. Sneezing as an exercise in itself was initially an odd experience: “Just such ODDNESS jars us into an awareness of what we qualitatively MARGINALIZE in our habitual ways of doing things. By making the familiar

strange, we FAMILIARIZE ourselves ANEW with the familiar.” [emphasis added] (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 143)

The purpose was to observe four qualitative aspects inherent in movement: 1) tensional (sense of effort), 2) lineal (the line of movement), 3) areal or amplitudinal (spacial), and 4) projectional (expressive).⁵ Our sneezing turned out to be a wildly animated group process with pauses of quieter exploration, a delightful experience of how “possibilities are adumbrated in the immediacy of the evolving situation itself” In exploring these four qualitative aspects in movement, we discovered a refined awareness within all our movements, one by one, and also as a group.

During the afternoon, while practicing a Feldenkrais lesson together, my colleagues and I studied the tensional, lineal, areal, and projectional aspects in each phase of the lesson. We discussed how bringing awareness to these four qualities could be instrumental in encouraging our students to learn for themselves, and about themselves. As students learn for themselves, they develop trust in their own abilities: they develop autonomy. A sneeze is a very personal and unique expression for each person. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s exploration with the sneeze provided yet one more tool for fostering our autonomy.

“Entrance into an imperturbable listening”

Autonomy is also a central aspect of ‘imperturbable listening’⁶: a concept developed by Jeff Haller, one of the Yachats seminar’s hosts. Haller spoke of an “entrance into an imperturbable listening” occurring many times during the weekend at Yachats. Imperturbable listening functioned as a centering for me. I felt my very own centre from where I could pause and move outwards again as appropriate. I experienced imperturbable listening as a coming down to the ground of my being, arriving at a moment where the hustle and bustle of worldly concerns could be set aside. I landed in the present, allowing what was emerging to develop in its own way, not disturbing or intruding on the process. At this “entrance” I found myself transparent, flowing, the usual thoughts fading, either while listening to the speaker, or welcoming the next words to write themselves on the page of my notebook, or while simply resting or moving in silence. The experience of imperturbable listening holds a timeless quality, akin to the Pause described in *Focusing* (Gendlin, 1978).

⁵ “Calling attention to ourselves in movement in this way, we have the possibility of discovering what is invariantly there in any felt experience of movement. This is because whatever the habitual movement, it now feels strange, even uncomfortable. Just such oddness jars us into an awareness of what we qualitatively marginalize in our habitual ways of doing things. By making the familiar strange, we familiarize ourselves anew with the familiar.” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 143).

⁶ “I have little interest in getting the cart and the horse mixed up as to which is in front. I don't give a whit about how a lesson appears to me or where it comes from. The suspension of mental activity and the entrance into an imperturbable listening is what happens. Listening for it destroys it.” (J. Haller, personal communication, November 5, 2013)

Jeff's "entrance into an imperturbable listening" complimented Maxine's lessons on "suspending our natural attitude," a phrase she used repeatedly throughout the weekend. During the seminar Maxine had been showing us more and more nuances of suspending our natural attitude and receiving the world as a fresh new moment, a phenomenological epoché⁷. Together, we listened. And all too soon came that closing morning, with one more exercise by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone to enchant every one of us.

Phenomenological Epoché ... resting into the pool of each other's eyes

On the last morning Ms. Sheets-Johnstone asked us to close our eyes while she read to us from a book. To this day I wonder about its title and author — perhaps a faery tale or a children's story. Although I could decipher only a few words, I sensed a poetic story of an enchanted journey through a beautiful place in nature. At the beginning of the exercise, I struggled with wanting to keep my eyes open to see Maxine, so that I could fully hear what she was saying. Of course, I realized that for us to have our eyes closed was an important aspect of the process Maxine was composing for us. The struggle to see and hear grew in me. I paused, and there came a feeling that the struggle was a familiar pattern from my everyday life, a relentless wanting to find a way to listen so that I could hear better. Amidst my spellbound colleagues, I turned this way and that, and even took a tiny step backwards for a bird's eye view from my partially closed eyes. I watched Maxine from unusual angles, sensing for an opening to understand her words, wondering all the while if my hearing might magically be restored.

Slowly it dawned on me that I might say something quietly to myself or even to Ms. Sheets-Johnstone. Even though my aim was to remain silent, I found myself suddenly turning to Maxine, saying I wanted to watch her speaking and moving so I could hear each word she was saying. Maxine nodded, smiled, and emphasized that closed eyes were essential to the exercise. The struggle in me softened, just a little. For a few more moments my inner dialogue continued to race along with thoughts from Sheets-Johnstone's writings, resonances with what she was reading, and my wanting to catch each and every word. Gradually, awareness of our group as a whole became enough to keep me focused on the exercise and the inner struggle to hear every word subsided. I listened to Maxine in a lighter, more expansive way and understood more of what she was saying without hearing every word.

As Maxine read from the book, she welcomed us to immerse ourselves in the story. I felt very much a part of the group, as though the story reached out to all of us and brought a widening of our environment. We rested into a new kind of awareness. It felt like a stillness and a complete resting while awake. At the end of the exercise, Ms. Sheets-Johnstone asked us to open our eyes very slowly as we turned to greet our partner. When we opened our eyes to see our partner, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone spoke about looking into the pool of the other through the eyes of the other. We were looking into the whole sense of the other, what we might call the soul of the oth-

⁷ "Epoché (ἐποχή, epochē, 'suspension') is an ancient Greek term which, in its philosophical usage, describes the theoretical moment where all judgments about the existence of the external world, and consequently all action in the world, are suspended." -- WIKIPEDIA

er, along with the sinews and bones and breathing, along with the widening environment of everyone there in the room.

Again, it was “an effective moment of my own being” (Gadamer, 1979, page xxiii). At this closing exercise, the effective moment came while I stood still inside myself and was about to open my eyes to gaze at my partner. There was a delicate transition from resting in the imaginative narrative of my soul, to the pivotal step of recognizing the otherness of my partner. It was such a quiet moment when I opened my eyes, seeing my colleague whom I had come to know in many ways. Just the two of us now in this exercise, resting into the pool of each other's eyes, brought an echo of the ‘Thou’ as depicted by Gadamer.⁸

The distinction between one partner and the other came to light in the (paradoxical) recognition which each of us found through looking into the depth of the other's eyes. Each partner's experience settled into the whole. With Sheets-Johnstone's enchanted story a natural ethic emerged. Recognizing each individual's limited horizon of understanding became an opening door, and no longer a barrier.

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⁸ “The experience of the 'Thou' also manifested the paradoxical element that something standing over against me asserts its own rights and requires absolute recognition; and in that very process is 'understood'” (Gadamer, 1979, page xxiii).

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