

On Health by Moshé Feldenkrais

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"A healthy person is one who can live fully his unavowed dreams."

A few years before World War II, I was teaching judo to make a living while working at the Sorbonne with Joliot-Curie for my doctor's degree in Science. One of my pupils turned out to be a hunter of wild animals in Africa, and he invited me to his house where I was left alone for a few minutes. I was startled when a lion walked in and came over to lick me. It had been brought to Paris as a cub and had grown up into a real lion.

A few months later the lion was taken by the police to the Paris Zoo. The lion had gone into the street and an old lady with a little Pekingese dog and dim eyesight, mistaking him for a big dog; chased him through the streets with her umbrella. After refusing food and drink for about ten days, the lion died in its cage. I have shortened the story by omitting the details. Now, there was a healthy animal that died, obviously due to an emotional trauma. But what is a healthy animal? If a healthy lion dies ten days after a sudden change in its life, what is health?

If a human being needs no medical services for years and has no complaints of pains or aches, is he or she healthy? If, on the other hand, this same person leads a dull, uninteresting life with marital difficulties that end up with suicide -- is that a healthy person? And is a person who never brings his or, her work to an end one way or another, and who keeps changing his employment only to avoid his duties time and time again -- is he in good health?

Obviously, health is not easy to define. It is certainly not enough to say that not asking for medical or psychiatric help is proof of health. What, then, is health?

Life is a process. This means that whatever goes on in us while we are alive is linked with time. Everybody knows that, even if nobody thinks or says so. A process cannot be stopped for any length of time, depending on the forces that are involved. And of course everybody knows that if the brain does not get oxygen for 10 or 15 seconds, the process stops altogether. If one succeeds in restarting it by chance, it is a new process and the person is never again what he was. If a person bleeds enough he bleeds to death, and a heart that stopped for that reason is not easy to set working again. In short, any process stopped, will not start again spontaneously. This is true of any irreversible chemical process or of any reaction. So, obviously, health means first of all that all the essential functions of a person must be able to continue without prolonged breaks. Consciousness, the central nervous system, the heart and so on have to go on uniformly.

There is nothing here that we don't really know.

Very large systems that function are also processes depending on time. Any of the very large companies or any nation are good examples: Ford, ICI, Philips, or any such large system. All such systems will continue functioning no matter which particular factory, mine, or city ceases to exist. The measure of a large system is the size of the shock it can take without its processes stopping.

Now, the human nervous system has $3 \cdot 10^{10}$ parts at least. This is a system large enough for its balanced functions to obey the law of large systems. The health of such a system can be measured by the shock it can take without compromising the continuation of its process. In short, health is measured by the shock a person can take without his usual way of life being compromised.

The usual way of life thus becomes the criterion of health. Sleep, food, breathing, changes of weather, cold, heat, work should all be capable of large variations -- sudden shocks. The healthier the person, the more easily will he regain the conduct of his life after considerable sudden shocks by changes in all the necessities for life.

On reflection there is nothing here that is very difficult to accept. Except that we may be surprised to find where this leads us. Our nervous system is not born as it is when we are adults. In order to get a system to work as it does in us, the nervous system needs the outside world. There is light of different intensities and colors. Objects are near or farther away, and so on. Our eyes therefore first have to learn to see, even a three-dimensional object in a two-dimensional picture. In short, our system needs a special part of the world to learn a language.

But there are more fundamental issues. The system is wired in through its sensory and kinesthetic organs to the external world. A nondifferentiated nervous system, while it grows, gets differentiated to cope finely with outside objects. What does this entail in a practical sense?

It means that we have to learn to separate functionally, i.e., to differentiate our senses from feelings. A baby seeing a red object has a feeling of red, since the object has no meaning unless you are grown up and know what the object is. Hearing a drum for the first time produces a feeling of something startling, a feeling of a kinesthetic jolt. Only later, having had many jolts of the kind, a differentiation of the sensation and the audible sense will result in hearing and perceiving a drum. The same sort of differentiation of the kinesthetic feeling from external objects which may affect our taste, tactile experiences, our smell, and the senses we have already discussed, will gradually occur.

All such differentiations do not happen to all the senses uniformly, and each baby has of course an entirely individual history of development. So that some people conceive the outside world preferably visually, some audibly, some tactually or kinesthetically. In reality most people have their senses and feelings differentiated to different degrees.

It is perhaps not self-evident that all of us can visualize or hear an object when we imagine it or when we recall the experiences which produced the differentiation. This applies equally to the other senses.

In the end it is this learning to know the outside world through our senses which forms our nervous system. A long, complicated learning process like this cannot be perfect nor error-free in all people. Just as there are all sorts of fish in the sea, there are all sorts of people in the world. Some will grow and form their own way of relating to the world in conditions of security, with a good heredity and at different periods of the growth of human civilization and culture. Others are not so lucky.

Some of the tendencies of every one of us will remain tendencies for as long as we live. They have never been differentiated to be of any practical use in acting and reacting in the world around us. So that everyone has his unavowed dreams when grown up. Our culture, parents, and schooling make us dismiss these dreams as infantile attitudes not befitting a realistic adult. We gradually suppress them, are somehow ashamed to be very serious about them. But luckily not all of us. Some exceptionally fortunate ones succeed even to the point of making them come true -- and some find their inspiration in other occupations just by avoiding taking their dreams seriously.

I am not sure that I have made the problem clear enough. Let me say, however, that a healthy person is the one who can live his unavowed dreams fully. There are healthy people among us, but not very many.

In our culture, the life-process, starting with a widening of the differentiation of the nervous system to a finer and more complete variety of experiences of the outside world, with an increased ability to change it for our growing intentional activity, slows and narrows its scope with sexual maturity. After that the system narrows its links with the external world as a whole and specializes in a particular aspect of the external phenomena. We become expert in a narrowing peak of activities and experience. We become a poet, a boxer, a scientist, a politician, a painter, a musician, an economist, a surgeon, a dancer -- the choice is interminable. Our learning is then not concerned directly with continuing the essential differentiation of the nervous system through a widening commerce with the outside world.

There comes a point where our education as it developed does not help us, but very often limits and directs us into channels which are not conducive to health. We become so unhealthy that we have to retire before we are biologically old -- we are simply unhealthy. Some bits of us -- those involved in the peak formation of our activity -- are worn out. The life process is narrowed. Activity is restricted more and more to the specialty in which we excel. Only those parts of the nervous system essential to continuing the process of biological existence function, after a fashion.

Even in our culture a number of us succeed in continuing their healthy life process to an old age -- an age, that is, where the unhealthy are already dotty and sick. Some of our best and healthiest men -- who, by the way, may be hunchbacks or have other deformities -- are the sort of people of whom we think as artists. Most artists, be they cobblers or sculptors, composers or virtuosos, poets, or scientists, like good wine, are best when they are old. The outstanding difference between such healthy people and the others is that they have found by intuition, genius, or had the luck to learn from a healthy teacher, that learning is the gift of life. A special kind of learning: that of knowing oneself. They learn to know 'how' they are acting and thus are able to do 'what' they want -- the intense living of their unavowed, and sometimes declared, dreams.

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