Movement lesson

Angela 2 — Week 5, Day 5, Session 4 — 54 minutes

Summary: Russell shows an articulated skeleton and traces how the metatarsals, heel, and ankle share load, then links that clarity to grounded presence and four-phase breathing. After questions on limitation, children, and neuromas, the group lies down for a lesson differentiating each foot and leg, interlacing toes, and standing to feel a softer, more reliable support.

The skeleton

[Russell:] So, this. A student put this skeleton together in a course she took. It's an articulated skeleton. I'm very grateful for her diligent work.

So, I know that for some people it's kind of obscure, what we're working with. But it's kind of funny. I had a student in Germany. I was teaching this kind of lesson in a group, and she was a Feldenkrais practitioner, and she had this great comment. She said, isn't it too kind of esoteric to teach to the general public?

And I said, feeling your foot clearly on the floor. Esoteric?

I knew what she meant, like too detailed or too precise or something. What's esoteric is dealing with your mind.

So, these are those important metatarsals, right? This area here is your toes. This area here, a very important area of articulation. Right. It's right in here. So this is — I mean, in Hebrew, this is called your toe pillow.

When these don't articulate — it's important that you have this picture of joints in general. When these lose their articulation, then it's like there's no shock absorption, no distribution. So you can picture what effort has to go into the ankle if these don't move, and that jamming in the ankle goes all the way up.

When the ankle is frozen, you can picture how the distribution that we want going through the ankle is being thrown back up through the skeleton. And if the person is vulnerable in their knee, or in their hip joint, or in their sacrum or lower back — those are the main places. Depending on where they're most vulnerable, that's where the dominant forces that are not being turned into movement come crashing back into the body.

So that's why articulating. And then not only that they can move, but that your brain gets the message that, oh, I can use this. It's not just for class. That this has something to do with my life when I'm not on the floor.

So I was pointing to the fourth toe, and it's not one point. For some people it's slightly to the right, some slightly to the left, but approximately around this area is where Feldenkrais, in functional

integration, used to love to lift feet up. Lift legs up from here. This is articulating the foot in a kind of perfect organization with the leg.

[Student:] No — holding the fourth metatarsal.

[Russell:] Yes, yeah.

And so, articulating each of these is a wonderful thing to do for yourself, for others, to get this movement around the whole foot. Then these movements that Feldenkrais practitioners know, of turning the whole foot and lifting, bending the leg with a little push on this malleolus, the internal malleolus, this turn, where the whole foot gets pliable, is really important for our whole leg and back.

Grounded presence

So, and thematically for what we're working with this week: to have a really good mobile sense of the ground, that we are supported well.

So I want to do another lesson on the ground, helping to bring greater awareness and differentiation to the foot and leg. And is it clear that the larger theme I'm working toward with these lessons has to do with how we can get embodied support in challenging moments, or in everyday life?

And what I'm suggesting is that what I call grounded, centered presence has certain physical infrastructures that are very helpful. When you see somebody standing with a real sense of, oh, they're really there — there's often a sense that they're on that spot, that their legs have some strength and vitality, and you get a feeling you could rely on them.

Well, we can grow something like that through greater clarity of our legs and feet. And then working with the breath. I'm suggesting particularly that four-phase breathing is a great ally, because when we're under pressure, we tend to either just hold the breath and breathe a little bit, or hyperventilate, or just — there's no feeling that we can pause.

So to consciously — you just feel like you have more time. Feel like the world's not coming apart. To intentionally — so I recommend to practice that in non-demanding moments, for your enjoyment. Often, even in an ordinary day, I can feel more spacious. My breath helps me.

Part of my pause is just to — my pauses during the day can include that four-phase breathing, and it will become something that's an ally too.

So is that clear, kind of how these lessons are stringing together?

When the body is limited

[Student:] Just, the body is — if the body has limitations, let's say someone has had a stroke, or doesn't have the full use of their leg, can you go from the pelvis and the sit bone to get the same bilateral support? I'm just wondering.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah. So one thing to recognize when people have had, you know, whether it's strokes or accidents or just this limitation from history — almost always, improvement is possible.

People coming out of the traumas of surgery, very rarely — the organism goes into a certain freeze pattern, and unless they have some activities that keep them really active, or some real awareness, will tend to constrict themselves more than necessary. And someone will say, oh, that's because

you had surgery. You get the — well, sorta. The surgery influenced it, but it's like you got into certain patterns of using yourself, and now, unless you have guidance, or somehow the awareness, you limit yourself more than the surgery demands.

And that's not rare. That's usual.

The same when somebody's had a stroke. You say, oh, of course they can't lift their leg, of course, of course. I said, and yes, they're not going to get back what they had before. There are certain limits. But almost always, unless the person has really cultivated a kind of awareness practice, or has some guidance, they will limit themselves more than necessary. More than the physiological, we could say, limitations.

So in this kind of a case, yeah, if they can't take weight on a standing leg, I might have them sitting in a chair and trying to bring some sense. Maybe if they can't move their leg — can you feel anything? I've had lots of people say that there's no feeling in the right leg, and they get some back. And that little bit that they get back makes a difference in being able to keep a little bit more weight on one side, whereas all the weight was going to the other side and they were starting to topple over.

But your insight also, that maybe working in sitting, and shifting weight in sitting, would be helpful. Absolutely.

[Student:] Well, I'm just also thinking of the ground, the body groundedness that we're working on. I love what you added to what my question was.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Student:] But to —

[Russell:] Yes. Groundedness in sitting is groundedness.

[Student:] Okay.

[Russell:] Yes. Groundedness in sitting is just as important as groundedness in standing. That's why I sometimes speak about these bones.

These are the sit bones, right? The bottoms here, this part that we tend to sit on, and this, have a lot of similarity in function.

And by the way, look at the heel. Can you see that it's predominantly lateral? It's not like the heel is in the middle. It's predominantly on the outside. Can you see what I'm talking about?

So this would be, if we took a line down, the middle of the foot. But the weight is lateral to the middle. When people lose that, and they shift their weight internally, and they're not really using their whole hip joint, they tend to flatten in their foot, and the weight goes more internally.

So, having a good sense of our heel, and a good sense in standing that the weight really can go through here — it then also goes through this hip joint. Through here, and supports the head all the way up. That's why when people tend to throw their weight forward, they lose that support, and they work a lot in their legs and back.

Heel, walking, and early patterns

[Student:] Okay. I never thought of this with that lateral aspect of the heel, that the fourth metatarsal is almost like the extension of that heel through the lateral arch.

[Russell:] Yeah, nice. That's right.

And in walking, if we think of a kind of ideal walking pattern, the heel strike goes up through — using your whole foot, but the predominant places are heel, fourth metatarsal, over to first metatarsal, pushing off of the big toe. So it's this movement of the foot. It's like a rolling from the outside to the inside.

And to have those articulations, to have that in your awareness, is really helpful. Not that you're thinking about it when you're walking, but that it's able to differentiate.

[Student:] Russell, do children start out in the correct groundedness, or is that something that starts out proper and then, you know —

[Russell:] You'd say theoretically that's true, but there's genetics. There's, you know — some kids start out with their legs more turned in or more turned out, and they —

[Student:] My eldest son's in-spinning was incorrect, so he had tarsal coalitions where the tarsals grew together, and they have to be found. But you can tell, you know, really early. So it does happen. And then they have to do surgery.

[Russell:] What I would say is, very often, one of the reasons why Feldenkrais-type work, and maybe things that would be similarly intelligent, working with kids — they're very influenceable, and they're not locked into so many patterns, and they're often shiftable.

And it's really through play, rather than, oh, you should step here. It's giving the organism options and letting it be free to find out on its own, and then giving it options and letting it.

So why the work is so — the hands-on work is so beautiful. It's attitudinally just like the embodied listening work that we do. You're bringing awareness, you're not forcing, you're bringing your presence to it. And the thing in the hands-on, which is saying, okay, feel this. Could this be okay? Is this okay? Is this okay? Now go live and see what you do with that, what your organism does with it.

[Student:] Just a quick question. I have probably three clients right now who have neuromas.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Student:] Do you think that's from bearing weight more? I mean, it's —

[Russell:] Yeah. Yeah.

[Student:] What's a neuroma?

[Student:] It's an inflammation. I have it too. It's an inflammation just above the fourth metatarsal, I think.

[Russell:] Well, it can be. It's often above the second metatarsal.

[Student:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Yeah, and it's even more often the collapsing inward.

[Student:] So where does the fourth one fit in then? Because that's not inward collapsing, right?

[Russell:] Right, right. You're special.

[Student:] Okay, I'd like to respond.

Children are frequently born with their feet kind of turned upwards from being in the womb. Not always, but — and there's a reflex that all babies have called the Babinski reflex. And if you stroke — and you can do this — stroke the outside of this foot, the toes will fan outward. And this is very helpful for straightening out the foot, if you're activating these metatarsals.

And also when babies start to curl on their belly, they'll use that big toe, which also kind of pushes from the big toe into the hip joint and helps align the legs. So all of those baby movements actively create the structure, if babies are allowed to move, you know, and have their normal —

[Russell:] Okay.

On the floor

Start lying on your back with legs long.

Let your attention drop into your pelvis and your sense of your legs. And just kind of a bird's eye view. Maybe not quite a bird — maybe just a little above yourself, or slightly.

I want you to have both legs at the same time, and then be able to go back and forth in your attention. So, not too close, but not too far away. Place your attention so that you can have both legs in one moment of perceiving, and then you can do a back and forth, listening to anything that's different from leg to leg.

And it can be something precise and physical, like the toes point out more, or this part of my leg is touching the ground. Or it could also be something more like, oh, this leg feels more available, or closer, or brighter, or duller.

So include whatever comes. We want to widen the field of perception.

And how the legs come into your pelvis.

And tuning into your left leg, begin a movement of just a little bit turning the foot a little bit left and a little bit right. Just feel how that goes through your leg. You let the foot turn. The leg will turn. You feel the toes point a little more leftward or a little more rightward, and you're listening to the resonance through your back.

So a student is asking, are you initiating with your foot or initiating with your hip?

Go back and forth. Experiment with different ways.

Notice if you can breathe and attend to your leg and foot and the influences.

And then as the toes come outward, let the knee open a bit and let the foot begin sliding up, as if you're now turning that foot, and the outside edge goes towards the ground and may eventually actually touch the ground. So the left leg is opening, and the foot begins sliding up. The left heel begins going towards your pelvis a little bit, the knee is going out to the side, and you're listening, because your whole body is involved.

Maybe you can sense actually your pelvis really shifts weight. Even your shoulders might shift subtly. Your head might begin to shift a little bit off of its neutral place. You don't have to try to do that, but just let the attention be both specific to the leg and also general to the whole self.

And then let your head go left as the leg goes left, and your head come back as the leg comes back.

Opening the field of attention to include a wider or larger sense.

Great, okay. And then pause for a moment.

[Silence 31 seconds]

Bend both legs to standing.

Put the left ankle on the right thigh near the knee.

And sense your right foot standing. Feel where the weight is on the right foot.

And sense how, without tightening in your breath, you can lift that right foot off the floor. Just feel. So you're bringing that whole configuration a little bit more towards your chest, towards your head.

Good.

And remember towards the end of our week last time, we did a movement where we got hold of the lower leg. So just feel that your right hand could come over near the ankle of the left foot. The right hand over the left foot, the left hand parallel to the right hand, but the left is closer to the knee.

And holding like this, lift your right foot into the air, and then let the lower leg come towards your chest a bit more, and then lower the right foot, but hold the left leg in the air. So the left foot is closer. Let the right foot come to the floor, and the left foot is no longer touching the right leg. And just gently roll a little left and right in this configuration. So you're bringing the left foot a little towards the floor on your right.

Just let that get easy, and the left knee can go towards the floor on your left, and the head is free to move. You're just letting that softening in the hip joint, your back.

[Student:] Is the right leg slightly bent, or flat?

[Russell:] It's bent.

[Student:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Just, if possible, you're not resting the left leg on the right leg, unless that's just too difficult.

Okay, now this next movement's gonna be hard with your socks on. So if you can, take them off. And please interlace the right hand through the toes of your left foot.

So it's palm to sole.

See if you can get in there. See if you can really find space.

It's always your favorite bit, isn't it?

Stop gritting your teeth, unless that helps. If it helps, then maybe grit some more.

And just keep holding your foot like that. Feel where you could move the foot and right hand in space. You can get support from your left hand on the leg if you like. Do whatever helps with your left hand, but you're just kind of being a monkey. You're feeling where you can move in space.

Can you move the foot towards the ceiling? Can you move towards the floor? Maybe the back of the right hand comes to the floor over on your right. But just freely experiment with breathing.

Being playful with it. It's unfortunate if we're too serious about it. We really want to invite a differing sense of that foot.

Yeah. And I wonder, could you come to sitting, holding the foot?

Okay, and lean on your left hand, and just see if you can lift the foot in the air. So we're holding the left foot with the right hand, if possible. And if you can't get in between the toes — if you can get even in between one of them, that's it. Good.

And then see if you can find the space between another one. You can move the same finger over. Just kind of really give it time. It's especially when we feel like, you know, that's not — I can't do that. To do it a little bit really makes a difference.

That's good. And reach around with your hand and your foot.

Okay, pause, and sitting for a moment. Put both legs out a little bit and just feel how different the legs feel.

Even in sitting here, I wonder if you have a little bit of a sense of those metatarsals. Interesting, maybe.

And then stand for a moment. Feel, just even a couple of minutes of play like that, what happens to the way the foot and leg take weight.

Sense that there's something like immediacy, or like it gives.

This is such a good thing to do for those of us dealing with difficulties with our legs, difficulties with our feet. It's so helpful. And usually when people have difficulties, the spontaneous thing to do is to withdraw from the area. Isn't that interesting? That the places that need our care the most, we withdraw from?

Wow.

So, to find a way to be in there. Come onto your sitting position again, and stand the heel of your left foot, and come over the top with your left hand. So now it's the palm to the top of the foot, and you're interlacing your fingers.

Yeah, yeah, it's the palm that's over the top of the foot. That's right.

And really see if you can use your right hand to pull the fingers through, create a little space. I know it can be a little uncomfortable, so don't torture yourself, but see if you can invite space in there. For some of us, we haven't had space between our toes in a long time.

And then see if you can just move the knee in and out of the arm.

[Student:] Could we shift over?

[Russell:] So it's the left hand now.

[Student:] Left hand?

[Russell:] So it's the left hand. Could the arm be on either side of the leg?

[Student:] Put the heel on the ground? Put the heel on the ground.

[Russell:] Yes!

[Student:] Sorry it took so long.

[Russell:] Okay, now see if you can bring the foot behind you a little bit. Could you bring the knee towards the ground? Lean on your right hand. Yeah, that's helpful. That's right. To the ground. Bring the knee to the inside.

Good, and then let go, and just lie on your back. And just take that, like we did at the beginning, that bird's eye view.

You know, this is a lot like going abalone diving.

[Student:] The diving is borderline.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Student:] Best part, hot shower.

[Russell:] What about eating the abalone?

Okay, so just lengthen your legs and feel the size of each leg, the volume and length of each leg, the way the legs lie, the way your back on each side lies.

Anything happen?

[Student:] Feet talking to me again.

[Russell:] Yeah. Just pause and let your brain work with what it's receiving, the differentiations that are coming.

[Silence 48 seconds]

The other side

Bend your left leg to standing. And feel the foot in its contact with the floor. Feel which parts of the foot you're sensing that are maybe a little bit more clear right now, or a little bit more present.

Just begin the process of pushing through the foot and turning your pelvis a bit to the right, and feel the stability through that heel. Can you sense that that calcaneus is a bit left of neutral? You feel where it takes weight the best, and how that goes through your knee.

Feel when you really feel a good skeletal support through that left leg.

Okay, and leave that length in your leg and —

[Silence 46 seconds]

Bend your legs, and put your right ankle on your left thigh.

Just a few times, lift the left foot. Just lift it off the floor. It's kind of bringing that whole configuration more towards your chest. Think of the hip joint bending in front. That's light and easy.

And then bring your hands onto your lower leg, so kind of parallel to each other. The left hand is kind of near that right ankle, and the right hand is somewhat near the knee, coming from the same side, though the fingers are pointing in the same direction.

Yes.

And then see if you can lift that left foot off the floor, bring the lower right leg closer to you, and then take it off the mothership. Let the left foot go back to the floor, and the left leg can stay bent. It's just they're separated. And now you're rolling left and right, just kind of finding how you can freely move, holding this leg.

That's good.

And then begin to experiment with bringing the left hand, palm to sole, between the toes. Take your time so that you don't force abruptly, but you find your way in.

And even if you can only get one finger through. For some people, it's really challenging. See if it's possible to just invite some space. The influence through the metatarsals and through the rest of the foot is really helpful.

Part of the loss of articulation is really felt in the — your toes won't move. And inviting that is surprisingly helpful.

And once you're through there, begin to see where you can move that foot in space. The right hand can help you anyway. Make sure you're still breathing, right?

For it to become more than simply a momentary benefit, it needs to be an integrated movement, which means that you can breathe, you can move comfortably, you can sense throughout yourself. That was another great insight of Feldenkrais, that you can do a movement mechanically and get short-term benefit, but the brain isn't going to learn anything.

But if you do it in a way that's more integrated — the breath is there, your attention is flowing, you're not forcing — that can become something that is available, that learning can occur. Something can become available over time.

Breathing, playing. And is there any way to come to sitting? Not abruptly. See if you can come up.

And in sitting, leaning on your right hand, feel where you could move easily, where you could move in space.

Free play.

Okay, let's go with that hand. Pause for a few moments.

Right hand over the top.

And then you get through there, and begin to experiment.

Standing and walking

Getting the first line of a poem I want to give you. It's driving me nuts. Let me see if I can find it here. I've got the whole poem except the first line. Where did it go? Pretty sure it's up here.

And then just let yourself stand up. I'm sorry, I got funny. What is that first line?

Oh, there it is. You've heard me say this before. It's one of my favorites.

Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you living in better conditions.

God would like to see more love and playfulness in your eyes, because these are your greatest testament to her.

You and I were once in the beloved's womb, playing footsie.

You and I once sat together in the beloved's womb, playing footsie.

You and I — your heart and my heart are very, very old friends.

You can see where that came from, right? Playing footsie. Walk with me.

Fear is the cheapest room in the house. Life's living very.

God wants to see more love, faithfulness in your eyes. These are your greatest destinies too.

You and I once sat together in the beloved's womb, playing footsie.

Your heart and my heart, very, very.

Feel the ground under you. Feel buoyancy there. Maybe you feel something like buoyancy there.

So I want to ask you seriously, and no is a really good answer, okay? And the answer is good. Can you feel that there's more shock absorption? Kind of like when you put weight onto the leg, in the back, it's a little easier?

[Student:] It's a challenging exercise, but it is beneficial. And the answer to your question is yes.

[Russell:] I so encourage this freedom in the feet, the influence it can have throughout the rest of us.

Okay, just one more little play here. Let's interlace the toes.

Come on. I'm serious. This is a classic Feldenkrais move. It is.

Yeah, that's the advanced class. Begin interlacing with each other. And that's really playing footsie.

Now, I've had three people in my career who could interlace their toes completely without their hands. Were you one of those?

[Student:] Yeah.

[Russell:] There was a woman from Asia in a German training. Well, she could just put her toes together. They were so articulated. She'd go like this, and then go like this.

[Student:] Yeah, exactly.

[Russell:] Yeah. Right, the brain is incredibly adaptive. I used to, in my Feldenkrais trainings, show this video of a mom without any arms who could hold her baby with her legs, bring the baby up to her breast, could drive a car.

[Student:] Right, she could butter toast, she could.

[Russell:] How cool is that? Talk about adaptive.

[Student:] Yes, that's right.

[Russell:] Okay. So, by the way, these are us.

You know, when I hear of extraordinary humanity, I both feel humbled and I feel, oh, that's part of me. What are the potentials that I'm needing in my life that I think are not available somehow?

But it's so interesting. It's like another part of sympathetic joy is feeling a part of the greatness of humanity. I mean, we spend so much time, unnecessary time, talking about how we're destroying the earth, but the other side is, boy.

I am not a super practical person when it comes to house skills and car skills and stuff like that. So I am still awed when I turn on my lights. I don't get it.

I don't get it. I don't get how it works. And literally at least once a day, I am having this sense of awe that human beings were able to do this, and thankfulness.

I mean, a little thing like — I don't get the way the plumbing works. It all astounds me. Radio. Radio, you know. Internet, man, you know.

But again, it's not just playing footsie. It is playing footsie, but it's not just the feel.

As you walk, you know, there are so many pictures in the womb of infants, in utero, hand to feet, playing with their feet, moving their feet. Sometimes those toes will — you know, that's not something that happens in interlacing, but our hands and feet getting connected neurologically brings some of the wisdom of the hands down. And then bringing the feet together, in terms of integrating left and right hemispheres, is a very helpful action.

But you can feel something. You want some reference for when it feels more hard, when you feel more hard in relation to the ground, so that you could have some kind of inner reference for softening. It doesn't mean you have to do the lesson. It means to recall the sensations and to invite your body. Could you have a little bit more softness? Maybe not as much as after a lesson, but something in that direction.

[Student:] Like, letting my legs do the walking.

[Russell:] Yeah, they know how to do it.

[Student:] They know how to do it. They're taking over.

[Russell:] Yeah. Isn't that great? It's like, oh, there's intelligence in there, and capacity, and — crap.

Your feet are the doorway to support on all levels. Right. Right. And you know what? Your feet are understanding.

I couldn't help it. I couldn't. I tried. They said no.

You can definitely — okay. Take a brief pause. We're not going to have much of a pause. Five minutes, we're going to come back and do another practice. Just enough time for the bathroom and like that. We're going to have a practice before we have lunch.