

Article

Mindy

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Mindy is a singer. I've given her four Functional Integration (FI) lessons over the last two years. I have also observed her in many Awareness Through Movement lessons. In her most recent FI, she came with very particular interests in mind. She had become aware that she "didn't feel solidly connected to the ground." She also experienced tightness in her solar plexus area that was even more apparent in stressful situations. The tight sensation was present, to some degree, most of the time. I could see that area was pulled in while the shoulders were coming forward. She had a sense that she was holding herself together in this area and the holding was contributing to her feeling of not being "grounded."

As we sat and spoke, something caught my eye. Each time she said the word "grounded" or the phrase "connected to the ground," she would press her feet against the floor, pushing herself back and away from her feet. I was curious if and how she would use this pushing of her feet into the ground when coming up to standing from sitting. This curiosity was my lead into the lesson. I thought it could be interesting to give her a sense of her legs and feet through the process of coming to standing which might address her interest in feeling "grounded." I speculated that a new use of her legs providing support under her could allow the tight area "holding her together" to stop working which could also contribute to a lengthening in her spine and torso.

I asked her to slowly start bringing herself up to standing. I noticed she actually started by pushing on her feet, which took her hip joints back in space. At the same time, she tilted the top of her pelvis forward, shortening in her lower back and lifting her chest a little which took her head backward. I had her pause in sitting. I placed one of my hands on her lower back, the other on her belly and asked her to take her lower back forward and backward where she felt my hands. I thought bringing her awareness to how she was using herself here could be a simple starting point to help inform her about what she was doing. She lowered her head forward and rounded her whole back backwards and then brought her whole back into an arch, taking her head backward and face towards the ceiling. I was looking for something smaller and simpler so she could pay close attention to the more subtle shortening in her lower back that took place in the process of coming to stand. At that point I asked her to pause. I had her start again and this time leave her head and chest simply sitting upright and only tilt her pelvis a small amount, taking her lower back a little forward and backward, using my hands to help her listen to that area. After a few movements, I asked her to find what felt to be the middle of the range of her movement and, maintaining this organization of her torso, to roll forward over her hip joints, tilting her torso forward, and then come back to sitting upright over her hip joints. I kept riding

along with my hands, bringing her attention to her lower back whenever she started to shorten.

We continued slowly in this way and I eventually introduced her to observing the unnecessary effort she was exerting with her legs and feet. I suggested we explore a way for her to come up to standing without the preliminary effort of engaging through her legs. I had her tilt her torso forward while rolling over her hip joints and staying aware of her legs. I asked her to feel for weight coming into her feet as she came forward and at that point to simply straighten her legs to stand. Right before coming to standing, she engaged the shortening of her lower back again. And then when reversing the movement, coming back to sitting, right before contact with the table, she stopped bending in her hips and knees and landed on the table with a slight plop.

At this point I chose to introduce some variation in the use of her legs while coming to stand and returning to sit, similar to ATM#1 in the Awareness Through Movement book. Starting in sitting, I had her slowly take her knees together and apart while we started the same process of slowly coming to stand, staying aware of her lower back and tilting her whole torso forward over her hip joints. After a few times of coming up and going down while opening and closing her knees, she said she was noticing the area of her solar plexus. She could feel that it was tightening to get her up - to hold her up - and it also seemed to stop her from coming down easily and smoothly. This felt like enough in sitting so I asked her to lie on her side, changing the orientation while keeping the same configuration as in sitting.

I had her lie on the side of her choice. I felt along her spine and noted there was a three to four inch section where the muscles on each side were much firmer and bulkier than along the rest of her spine. This section was at the level of her solar plexus where, in the beginning, she had described having tightness, as well as where she had felt the tightness a few moments before while coming to sit and to stand. I was curious what I could learn about the organization of her torso and spine by contacting her at her sit bone to see how well I could connect through to her head. I discovered the force didn't move through to her head very clearly. Instead, the force dissipated out through the front of her belly. The movement that did travel upward met her thoracic spine and ribs which all moved more or less as one unit. From there I could see the movement traveling up to her head. When I rolled her pelvis into a variety of positions to help move through her lower spine more clearly, I still ran into a feeling of one large unit at the level of her ribs and chest. I wanted to bring my fingers to the thoracic vertebrae while pushing through the sit bone but both of my hands were required to push from her sit bone and keep her pelvis positioned.

I left pushing through the sit bone for the moment, with the intention of returning to it later. I wanted to include that particular area of her spine, where I had sensed the muscles as bulkier, in her self image along with a sense of length. My

strategy then was to access that point through a variety of trajectories, including it in the picture with all that I did. I started by going directly there--I shortened the muscles along both sides of the spine at the same time, bringing that area a little forward, and held for a bit. When she took a nice big breath, I eased away.

From there I placed my hand (which was nearer to her pelvis) on the side of her ribcage. With my other hand I went to the section of vertebrae where earlier I had found to have higher muscle tonus. I placed my finger pads under those spinous processes, so I was in the groove alongside the spine on the side closer to the table. I brought the ribs in the direction of those vertebrae where I had my fingers. I went back and forth between my two hands, sensing the connection of her ribs to her spine. This was to clarify the image of her ribcage as well as sense its connection with the spine. While staying in contact with her spine, I brought my other hand in front to her solar plexus region where she had earlier described tightness. I brought that area backward, directing it towards my other hand on her back. I had switched my fingers to be on each side of one of the vertebrae. As my hand in front brought that area down and in the direction of her spine, the fingers at her spine suggested lengthening towards her head. I gradually reversed the direction of the movement between my two hands, eventually creating an alternation between a little flexing and extending in that area of her torso.

From there, I went to her pelvis. Rolling her forward and backward from the pelvis, I observed how the movement traveled through her torso. I was interested in moving her spine in a sequential twist from the bottom-up and, in particular, seeing how I could include the area of her spine I had just been touching. I found that by taking her pelvis back and a little down, I could feel a sequential sense of lengthening, and with that came another nice breath. Next I went to her shoulder to roll her. I continued sensing my way into that section of her spine and ribs by way of twisting from the top-down this time. I then took the top arm a little forward and up, lengthening the arm so that the sense of the arm reaching was connected to lengthening from the same area of her spine. This elicited some nice breathing as well.

From there I draped the arm across the side of her head. I held her head securely with one hand and placed my other hand at her neck and C7. Thinking down into the same area of interest, I imagined it as the point of a cone as I circled her head, neck and arm, which was describing the shape of the rest of the cone, exploring one direction and then the other. Then I returned to her sit bone. This time as I pushed through I felt a much clearer connection to her head, passing cleanly through her thoracic spine.

I felt I had engaged her in sensing herself and this area through a variety of trajectories while she lay on her side. From there I had her come onto her back. This began our transition back to where we started in sitting. While she was on her back I lifted her shoulders alternately, thinking of connecting into the same

area of her spine again. I placed one arm across her chest, hand to opposite shoulder. I lifted the shoulder of the crossed arm and rolled her diagonally, thinking of crossing at that point again. I did the same with the other arm.

To finish with a sense of length through her spine, I pushed through to her pelvis from C7, really thinking of making a clear pass through the same area of the back. I lifted her head and found a small tilt of the chin towards the chest to be the best angle for pushing through from the top of her head. With a connection to the pelvis, I held for a moment and she took a full breath. I went to her feet and pushed through to her head from each foot, sensing a clear connection and lengthening through her spine to her head.

At that point I had her come to sitting. I turned her head a tiny bit side to side, feeling a light and easy movement there. We slowly reconnected with the process of moving from sitting to standing so she could register any changes from the beginning of the lesson. This time I touched her front and back at the pivotal point of her solar plexus and spine where I had been exploring while she laid on her side. Tilting forward from the hip joints several times, staying very quietly connected to the whole line of her torso, bringing her weight over her feet, finally she came completely up to standing. She reversed it in the same manner. We repeated this a few times, emphasizing staying long through her spine while her weight poured into her feet as she came forward. She said she had a good strong sense of her legs and feet in standing and that the area of holding in her belly had now let go. She took a slow walk, attending to her experience.

This lesson and our mutual discoveries inspired many ideas and insights to investigate in our future lessons. I am now curious to work with her lying on her belly, bending her knee, clarifying the foot and ankle behind her and having her press her foot into my hand straight up to the ceiling. This could be a way to connect her into her feet and legs in another orientation. It could be interesting to reconnect to her solar plexus area by having her explore pulling it in or pushing it out combined with the leg and foot pushing backward. Connecting her voice with different movements would also be a fun exploration, as she is a singer, noting if and how her tone changes when her balance and stability is challenged. Knowing her voice as she does, this could be a useful barometer for her to use while exploring moving and sensing herself. I would also be interested in how having a clearer sense of the connection of her arms into her center could affect her voice and that area of tension she complained of in the beginning of this lesson, if it is still an issue in her next lesson. As for this lesson, it was very successful in helping her experience a sense of length and in particular maintaining length during the function of coming from sitting to standing.

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