

**Interview with Ellen Kamhi, PhD, RN, the “Natural Nurse,”  
on her WUSB FM radio program May 2, 2008 6:15–7:00 pm EDT**

*Our guest is Ruthy Alon, and she is actually calling in all the way from Israel. I want to thank you so much for joining us this evening, Ruthy.*

Thank you. Yes.

*And you sound so loud and clear all the way . . .*

. . . all the way from Jerusalem, yes.

*It’s amazing. Now you’re a Senior Trainer in the Feldenkrais Method and you studied for many years, starting in 1959. . . . I don’t often meet people who are involved in Natural Health longer than me, so this is really an honor. What made you feel drawn to study the Feldenkrais Method way back then?*

Oh, that was good luck, just good luck. It’s not that I came from a specific problem; I just loved, and still love, to move. I was lucky that there was Moshe Feldenkrais at that time, and I was able to study with him and discover a whole world that was really different from anything else I knew.

*What do you mean by “different?”*

It’s different because we don’t show our students an ideal final product — one that we think is ergonomic. We don’t ask students to try hard or their best to imitate us, or to use willpower or effort. We are doing something different: We are educating the entire system, i.e., the entire organism, *beyond its cognitive self*. We explore unused options and come to re-trust our system’s own judgment mechanism to come to another, more pleasant policy toward self-management. The learning manifests itself as discovery, leading to a ready acceptance and a ready willingness to incorporate itself into daily life.

It *sounds* different and new, but actually this is the way we learn by nature. It’s how a child learns, by trying all kinds of variations, until something suddenly makes better sense. It is the difference between taming an animal and developing an inner intelligence; enabling the system to assess, explore, and to find easier and more efficient ways of acting. Our process is to guide each person toward his or her very own body intelligence, which is often hidden by old habits. Organization of movement, that is, coordination or the lack of it, can be as persistent as any other addiction — and addictions don’t respond too well to willpower or to wishful thinking. So we *are* doing something really different.

And this practice, which was being taught by Moshe Feldenkrais himself, actually was used to teach many high-end professionals, such as former Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion. Feldenkrais was Ben Gurion’s private coach. He gave him lessons, private lessons, a few times a week. And I tell you, those were the years when Ben Gurion exhibited such a strong authority. I would not be astonished if this was in part because of what Moshe Feldenkrais opened up in him.

*You wrote a book in 1970 called **Mindful Spontaneity** that’s still available now.*

Yes, it’s available from North Atlantic Books, and also from Feldenkrais Resources.

*And it’s been translated into 5 languages . . .*

Even more; the latest is Russian.

*That's fascinating! What do you talk about in Mindful Spontaneity?*

That was really long ago, at the start of my discoveries — when I was still very idealistic about what was the potential of our movement; that we didn't have to be stuck in our compromises, by taking for granted that the body would betray us as we aged; that there always remained the possibility of learning, improving, re-igniting a potential which had been there from the beginning. In my book I present a few exercises. Actually we don't call them exercises — calling them exercises has a connotation of effort — it's really just body movement. I also offer some explanations, from the level of understanding I had at the time.

*In other words, you have grown in your knowledge of this method and of other techniques?*

Yes.

*Yet the book Mindful Spontaneity has a lot of worthwhile basic understanding of the method.*

Right. And some people tell me they keep it by their bedside, and every night they read a page.

*They use it as an inspirational manual . . .*

*Now to your website, Bones for Life.com. You talk about the fact that this method, the Feldenkrais Method, can also help with bone health. However, it doesn't seem that it's about taking calcium and other supplements to increase bone density, but about approaching bone health from another point of view.*

**Bones for Life** is a special program that I devised — based on the Feldenkrais principles of how the body learns through “somatic learning” — about satisfying the specific need of giving *impact* to the bones; to remind us that impact is needed. By this I mean that it is our bones' destiny to support our weight, and to make our movements easier. If we don't give our bones impact, our organism might conclude that there is no need for strength, for withstanding weight and pressure. So we challenge the skeleton in many ways: pulsed pressure, rhythms, springiness . . . and we employ all kinds of body configurations through which movement affects our bones more than happens in everyday life — especially for those of us who have weakened bones (probably because of not impacting them enough).

*Do you know there's an interesting machine which we discussed here on Natural Alternatives last week. . . . It's used by NASA because when astronauts enter a zero-gravity environment (for example during space travel) their bones tend to de-mineralize rapidly. NASA scientists found that the particular kind of impact transmitted by this machine, while you stand on it and it shakes you, increases bone density quickly. However, you, Ruthy, are not talking about a machine — you're talking about people using their own movement combined with various alignment techniques — but it seems that your method would be similar to the workings of this machine in terms of distributing pressure on bone, thereby promoting greater bone health.*

Yes, I know about this machine; I also tried it. It's amazing that NASA's astronauts, with the highest level of fitness in the world, if they were not exposed to gravitational forces their bones would become weak, just like anybody else's bones would, distorting and

inviting all kinds of trouble. The machine is very good: it gives interaction with gravity, but — there is a “but” to it — if somebody were not aligned well (I’m sure astronauts are all aligned perfectly) — if somebody had a compressed neck (with too much in-curve so that the head wouldn’t stack on top of the spine) and such a person were to use the vibrating board, the distortion of the neck would be reinforced, and the neck would be aggravated rather than strengthened. Not everyone can simply step up and use this machine. The strengthening of bone tissue is dependent on weight-bearing posture, and in the Bones for Life program weight-bearing posture is what we develop, in safety. We have a lot of processes that provide shortcuts to better posture.

*What do you mean by “shortcuts?” And what do you mean by “better posture” . . . what people consider good posture? Like sitting up straight; like what is taught in ballet — is that what you’re referring to?*

I mean a posture that transmits power, the force from the ground. In standing, when you stomp your foot on the ground as if to take a step, if your posture is transmitting the force throughout your skeleton all the way to the top of your head with no loss of power, no deviation, and no delay — and not too much loading on any one joint, or bypassing of joints — we refer to this posture as “functional.” It doesn’t have to be a straight geometric line; it can be naturally curved along with the body, provided it is streamlined. The streamlined stacking of vertebrae, and of larger bones as well, produces a “domino effect.” The dominoes can be laid out in all kinds of curves, as long as the movement can transfer from one domino to the next, one end of the spine or arm or leg to the other. If the deviations are too sharp somewhere, the movement will stop. There will be friction at that place, joint compression and pain — and the sufferer will no longer want to move that area.

If we want to have dynamic movement that will “talk” to the bones in all circumstances, we have to guarantee proper body alignment. This is a matter of great sophistication because our alignment has to change at every moment, along with the changes in our movements. So we don’t need to know only “one thing.” We need to develop a talent, the dynamic talent of adjustability; of having our senses wide awake and knowing the possibilities instinctively.

*You have something on your website that’s quite inspirational. It’s called the “Integration Prayer”*

**God please grant me flexibility in my joints,  
so I will have freedom of movement;  
And give me the strength of fastening one vertebra on top of the other,  
so I will have a reliable axis;  
And the wisdom to know the difference.**

*That’s an interesting poem!*

Because we need both, flexibility *and* strength. There were years in my life when I thought it was all about flexibility; that movement was about being flexible. But now with the widespread awareness of bone deterioration in modern Western culture, I see that we also need *power*, and I found ways to combine flexibility and power, and to integrate them functionally. So this is a functional prayer — the “Integration Prayer” of our bones.

*With the Feldenkrais Method, would you say that what you've developed has gone beyond Feldenkrais, or are you still a Feldenkrais Practitioner? Would what you do be the same as what other Feldenkrais practitioners might share with their clientele?*

I would say this: Feldenkrais started with Judo — this is the ultimate movement challenge, one that has all the discussed aspects. But in his method Feldenkrais created a kind of laboratory for coordination — superb coordination — where people learned how to develop this talent in themselves. His laboratory was largely without gravity: lying down, just to observe connections and correspondences, during hundreds of different movements. However, to develop bones, we also need the impact of power and rhythm. Therefore I needed to use his method in another context — but it's the same principles of learning. And I'm still a Feldenkrais Trainer; I also continue to teach Feldenkrais.

*Thank you for sharing that.*

I heard Moshe — I studied in the first generation of teacher trainees and knew him personally — I heard him say that he hoped that his method, his methodology, his approach would be used for many other things, not just for movement. So I feel total integrity with having developed this program, which highlights a specific need. Nevertheless, you should realize that it's not *just* for the bones, because in order to strengthen the bones we need to take care of everything else. This work has many applications, and many aspects and benefits that my students and their students can, and do, enjoy.

\*\*\*\*\* Commercial Break \*\*\*\*\*

*We have as our guest Ruthy Alon, a Senior Trainer in the Feldenkrais Method. Ruthy is telling us about the Feldenkrais Method. She has been working in the field since 1959, and wrote a book in 1970, so she's certainly not a newcomer! Her website at [Bones for Life.com](http://BonesforLife.com) demonstrates how you can discover Intelligent Fitness, Quality Aging, Osteoporosis Prevention, Personal Ergonomics, and the Body Language of Leadership. I really like this kind of discussion, so thank you for bringing it to us, and thank you for being our guest today here on Natural Alternatives . . . and Welcome Back, Ruthy!*

Thank you; my pleasure.

*Now what is the special contribution of your program, specifically to Osteoporosis?*

The model for my osteoporosis program is the African water carrier.

A sad catch is that a large number of people in Western cultures are not physically fit enough to move without getting injured. They fail in their personal confrontation with gravity by walking too slowly and without rhythm, preferring to travel by car or similar physically passive modes of transportation — all to the detriment of their bodies. One cannot right away teach these people dynamic movement that would hopefully heal their bones. Their bodies first have to become organized, which is the main catch. By making use of Feldenkrais principles, we can gently and gradually develop in them the ability to confront physical challenges safely. We first teach our students to use their own hands to align the neck or the lumbar spine. For example, we use a strip of cloth, seven meters long, as a wrap that acts like a soft yet supportive harness. We also use a wall for support, as well as the floor, all the time working gradually and safely. And with this approach we succeed, and our success shows — even on the outside.

We studied two separate groups of participants who practiced for a period of four months. We used bone density measurements as a criterion for bone health and obtained significant improvements.

I would like to talk a little about the model for our program, the African women who carry large containers full of water on their heads: the African Water Carriers. Scientists are intrigued as to how such graceful, often quite small women are able to carry such heavy weight, as much as a third of their body weight, and not compromise their breathing or their heartbeats. And they do this day after day after day! Their posture is the best in the world, and not only that: Research published in November of 1996 in the journal of *Body Mineral Research* showed that these women had fewer bone fractures than Western women, in a ratio of one-to-a-hundred. Unbelievable; they simply don't fracture their bones! What intrigued me most was the finding that it's not only bone density and diet that contribute to this difference.

*They don't necessarily have good bone density? It is not necessarily bone density that counts?*

No, they don't have higher density than we do in the West, and yet they don't fracture their bones . . . because they have the experience of carrying heavy loads, and of organizing their movements in rhythms that are economical and balanced. They appear to have a heightened sense of equilibrium, which allows them to deal with the extra weight without getting tired, without deteriorating; in fact, rather than deteriorating, it's the other way around!

Our conclusion is that these women have special skills that are learned — skills which can be learned by everyone. It has been my passion to decipher the components of their walk: their alignment, the way the foot detaches from the floor, every detail of each movement. The result is that my students, in learning these skills, begin to change their posture, their capacity to deal with weight, and hopefully to also strengthen their bones.

*One thing you mentioned to me when we were on our break, off-air, is that you could share over the air a mini-exercise or movement lesson which perhaps our listeners would be eager to participate in.*

Yes, we can do that! Will you do the movements with me as well?

So, you are sitting on a chair. Look up to the ceiling several times. Look up and then return.

*Do we keep the head straight ahead and look up at the ceiling — only with our eyes — or do we lift our face to look up?*

First, you need to get away from leaning on the back of the chair! Sit freely. Experience how sitting feels to you, and then do that movement of lifting up your face, which is by way of arching.

Now, to improve, here is what we *don't* do: we don't try to repeat the movement with more power — with willpower — trying harder to do the maximum. In fact, we don't even raise the head . . .

Put one hand on your belly, the other on your chest. Holding your body in this way with your hands, bring the hands closer together and you will create some bending in your back. And then come back. Do this several times.

Using your hands, guide your belly and chest closer to one another; your torso will bend down, your head hanging down a little. And then come back. And now, every time you bend down, begin to brush one foot on the floor closer to yourself, until it detaches from the floor. One foot. Each time the same foot. Every time the chest and belly come closer to each other, and the head hangs down, brush the foot toward you until it lifts off the floor. The toes are the last to leave the ground.

Do this several times more, and then brush your other foot, coordinating the movement of the foot with the movement of the belly. Every time return to the initial position to look at the horizon — don't leave the head hanging.

Continue doing the movement of your belly, but now alternate the brushing of your feet, once brushing with the right foot, then with the left. It's part of the formula of walking. Very strange walking, but it has some components of that formula.

Good, take a rest. Just sit and notice how sitting feels to you now.

Let's go back to the bending with the help of the hands, but this time emphasize the bending by using the foot that stays on the floor. Push it a little more into the ground while the other foot lifts, without the brushing. Just notice the foot that stays on the floor, and lend it some power every time your head bends down. With the bending, roll a little backwards, as if you were going to begin to lie on your back; you are leaning on the chair behind the pelvis. Feel the power of the foot pushing into the ground. And then let go of that, and just sit; take a moment and see how is your sitting. Is there another flavor to it, another atmosphere? Do you feel you can sit a little longer now, without worry?

Now, lift your face up toward the ceiling; see how that goes.

How was it for you Ellen? How is the looking up now?

*It was ok to begin with, but I guess for someone who felt stiff, there might be more movement now, and flexibility in the neck, I would imagine. It was a very relaxing feeling to do those movements.*

Rather than “relaxed” we prefer terms like “organized”; relaxation can imply collapse. What one could say about experiencing the movements we just practiced might be that lifting up the head became easier. I did not try to demonstrate or to give an order to myself or to you or the others to reach a certain place with the head. Instead we developed harmony within ourselves, some coordination between the different parts of our bodies. Our approach is not to try to heal a certain muscle by dealing with it specifically. Instead, it's like ‘family therapy’ — searching for the emerging cooperation of all the family members. This is the genius of the Feldenkrais Method, which is centralized on organization, on integration; this organic characteristic is its highest value.

What we did so far was really just a symbolic two-minute portion of a fuller exploration, one that usually takes much longer. We often spend up to an hour focusing on a particular theme — every time something else. Our entire program consists of 90 processes.

*So it's 90 sessions, if people start to learn this method. Now how is it incorporated into one's daily schedule? For instance, I do Yoga at least 30 minutes a day, and I walk at least 3 miles a day, and then I lift weights. So I actually write into my daily routine the movement that I'm going to do on a particular day, and I have to set aside the time for this, as well. In terms of Feldenkrais, how is it incorporated into one's daily schedule? How much time would we need to do it, once the lessons were all completed?*

You are very fortunate that you find the time to do all these things. I don't specify to people how much time to spend, but they take what is meaningful for them, and they repeat it — especially the bouncing on the heels which we do (this is a very basic thing). I hope that we could do that here too — but not this time . . .

*The bouncing on the heels sounds like it might duplicate that NASA treatment . . .*

Yes, it duplicates it. And in fact it was invented by a space engineer from Russia, Alexander Mikulin, and he did it for his heart. If you like, you can try now:

Just stand in front of your chair. Feel how you are standing for a moment, and then lift your heels just 1 centimeter — very little — and then bump them into the floor. And do that again; just that. Feel how your standing creates a pressure into the ground which, in turn, creates a counter-pressure that loads your body, from the ground upward.

Now you can do double bounces, like a heartbeat: “pum-pum,” “pum-pum” . . . Mikulin did this for a serious heart problem, at age 50. They didn't think he would live much longer then — but he was playing tennis at the age of 83! This movement — which helps the heart, and the circulation, because it doesn't leave it all for the heart to pump — is exactly what the bones need, too. It gives the blood more power, so it can really penetrate the envelope of the bones, and deliver nourishment.

*I was wondering, after I read about that NASA machine . . . You're just teaching us how we can do that movement for ourselves! How long would you have to repeat this bouncing-on-the-heels movement for it to be effective?*

A very few minutes. I have evidence from people who did not do other things, but who just repeated the bouncing on the heels, and who still got improvement in bone density. What I do, at the same time, is place a hand on the neck — the little finger at the base of the skull, and the index finger on the big [C7] vertebra at the base of the neck — opening the span of the fingers, spreading them out, and letting the neck lean on it. In this way you guarantee that there is more continuity of the neck with the spine. And like this you bounce. And you do something similar in the lumbar area; you also notice where is the focus of pressure in the feet. We incorporate many components that make for a healthy alignment; then it really works . . . and it is different from just using a machine.

*That's for sure. Yet there is so much science behind the fact that it works.*

People mastering their own movement, and feeling their improvement — we call this “Biological Optimism.” But this doesn't occur when the movement happens passively.

*“Biological Optimism” — That’s a great phrase!*

I say this is the main gain of the program; the improvement in the bones is the bonus . . .

*Is there any limit to the number of times you would do that bouncing during a day? I could see incorporating it even if you’re sitting at a desk; you could stand up and do it for a few minutes at your desk . . .*

Wonderful — Yes. I tell people to do it according to their feeling, as long as they feel it gives them something, that they learn something, that they are connected with it; it’s not about repeating it mechanically.

*What is your overriding vision, after so many years in this field? As we talked about when we introduced you earlier, you’ve been doing this since the 1950s . . . What is your vision for the future, in terms of this method, and in terms of the health of the planet?*

I’ve trained many teachers; in the United States alone there are a few hundred — you can find them on our website [Bones for Life.com](http://BonesforLife.com), or also on the website of the teachers’ organization: [Movement Intelligence.org](http://MovementIntelligence.org). There are brilliant teachers, very devoted; they teach faithfully. . . . So I hope that people will go and learn from them, and the population will soon look different — especially the aging population. I myself am close to 80, and I still improve every day.

*Well that’s certainly inspirational. I just visited my aunt, who’s 102 — so she would call you a “spring chicken!” It’s all relative.*

I do hope that the public will take it, and use it . . . and enjoy it!

*It sounds like something that, once learned, is very easy to incorporate into one’s life. And which can bring a great sense of balance and increased health, as well as — our focus today — healthier bones.*

*So I want to thank you again for being our guest here on Natural Alternatives, and I’d like to remind our listeners that they can find out more about Ruthy Alon, and her program [Bones for Life](http://BonesforLife.com) on her website [Bones for Life.com](http://BonesforLife.com).*

*There’s a beautiful picture of you there on your website, Ruthy, doing that heel-bouncing movement; it’s beautiful.*

Thank you very much, Ellen. I appreciate your message, and the opportunity to speak to your audience. And let me say that the picture you see on the website is in fact about “jumping” — another wonderful bone-building activity; in our program, we arrive there, too!

*Thank you so much, Ruthy — and be well!*

Thank you!