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method man

eric franklin pioneered a system that merges mind and body to overcome stumbling blocks and achieve excellence—in your pilates practice *and* in your life

BY ROBIN WESTEN

as a dancer, movement teacher, university lecturer, prolific author, artist and the creator of a mind/body discipline that bears his name, Eric Franklin is quick to tell you that his own mind and body are in cahoots—and they're on a mission of consciousness.

Since 1986 Franklin has been teaching his trademark system of imaging and hands-on anatomy training to thousands of

appreciative students in places as far-flung as Guangzhou, China (where he earned the distinction of being the first Westerner to teach anatomy-based movement), as well as to innumerable dancers and Pilates instructors here in the United States and most of Europe.

Even among the crowd of mind/body disciplines, the Franklin Method is a standout. Blending theory and practice, it teaches you how to address the mind through the use of imagery in all of its applications as well as how the body is designed to function, a core principle of the method. But the work isn't one-size-fits-all. Franklin believes that if an image doesn't correspond to the way the

body is designed, the result will actually be a *decline* in function. As a result, the Franklin Method is totally student-centric. Students discuss what they want to achieve, and then they are invited to psychically tune in and create a personal reaction. Cues are tailored from those

"Strength is not only how strong your muscles are but how well your brain organizes your body for movement."

responses and are not based solely on the teacher's expertise.

Franklin's early dance training is evident in his flexible-as-a-spring body. He danced with the Rebecca Kelly Company, Solaris Dance and Contact Improvisers in New York City, as well as with the Swiss Zurich Dance Theatre; choreographed at the American Dance Festival; and taught for the Royal Ballet School in London, the Danish Ballet in Copenhagen and the Dance Academy of Rome. He's trained the Swiss Olympic gymnastics team as well as individual Olympic and world-champion athletes. Recently, Franklin taught workshops for the Cirque du Soleil artists of the

O show at the Bellagio in Las Vegas to improve their physical and mental skills and help their bodies thrive and remain healthy despite years of physically demanding shows. Next up are teaching stints at New York's Julliard School, the Forum de Dance in Monte Carlo and a

dance college founded by Pina Bausch in Germany.

Literate and artistic, Franklin has also authored 12 books—and illustrated them.

The most recent

is *Fabulous Body, Fabulous Mind* (Princeton Book Company, 2009). His books have been translated into German, English, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czech, Korean, Mandarin and, coming soon, Japanese and French.

Franklin's disco-ball energy and lithe, elegant physical presence makes it hard to believe he's 52. He credits his technique not only for his perfect posture but also for his enthusiastic approach to life. The Swiss-born Franklin is a divorced father of three who flies around the globe with seagull grace. He has chosen not to maintain a studio of his own but to remain untethered, free to carry his method to enlighten stu-

dents anywhere he's invited.

Though he never pursued Pilates as a career, Franklin was told by his first instructor, Linday Tarnay, a former director of dance at NYU, that he was a natural. At NYU he had the good fortune to study with Kathy Grant, who was (and still is) the department's in-house Pilates trainer. Franklin acknowledges that Pilates was instrumental in helping him grasp the mind/body connection firsthand. Today, as the creator and primary emissary of this work, he is the go-to guy for marrying bodywork with focused, creative imagery. "This training should be part of every school, college, university, hospital, kindergarten and educational facility," believes Lindy Royer, a physical therapist in Colorado who recently completed the Franklin Method teacher training.

I have the good fortune to meet with Franklin in New York City after one of his workshops. Sitting close to him on the floor of my sun-blasted loft, I'm struck by the way his soaring energy matches the high beams. For a moment I actually see a glow around this serene

yet vibrant cross-legged figure. Basking in his energy, I'm eager to discover the source of Eric Franklin's luminescence.

Q: Childhood often places us on a particular path. Looking back, would you say this was true for you?

A: Very much so. I was born in a big city—Zurich—but soon after, we moved to the countryside near Lucerne. So I

"The closer your body image relates to your actual design, the better your function."

was raised where nature was in charge. It was a great environment for a day-dreamer like me. I spent hours sitting in the fields, looking up at the sky, taking in the air, the atmosphere.

Q: So, do I take it you were an introvert?

A: Definitely. I was an observer. Not just visually; I could also feel what was going on around me emotionally, physiologically and psychologically. Of course

when you're a kid, you think everyone is experiencing the world exactly the same way.

Q: When did you discover that you were more attuned than most?

A: Early on. I remember my drawings were different from the other kids'. They drew bright yellow suns with big, happy smiles; mine were way out there—abstract with lots of different colors. In retrospect, I realize I was drawing the embodiment of the sun, rather than the illusion or the cliché of the sun.

Q: It sounds like you were destined to be an intuitive or an artist—or both.

A: Hardly. I went to a prep school in Zurich with my mind set on studying science or languages. But as life would have it, I got involved in the school's theater group. It was through acting that I deepened my understanding of human nature. To act, I had to be fully in touch with my being before I could assume the physical and emotional life of another character.

Q: Did your theater experience set the stage, so to speak, for the Franklin Method?

A: [Smiles] I'd say it strongly influenced it. Teaching is theater in some respect. Learning begins with curiosity. If the students are not aroused and curious about the subject matter, they will not be present enough to learn and make changes. Theatricality helps, because it infuses a class with rhythm and variation. This does not mean a class is unscientific. It is just that boredom does not help learning.

Q: For our readers who aren't familiar with the Franklin Method, can you summarize its basic tenet?

For more info on the Franklin Method or to find an upcoming workshop near you, visit www.franklinmethod.com or the blog franklinmovement.com. Franklin's books (and posters and tiny fitness balls) can be purchased at optp.com and amazon.com. His books include:

- *Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery* (Human Kinetics, 1997)
- *Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance* (Human Kinetics, 1997)
- *Relax Your Neck, Liberate Your Shoulders: The Ultimate Program for Tension Relief* (Princeton Book Company, 2002)
- *Pelvic Power: Mind/Body Exercises for Strength, Flexibility, Posture and Balance for Men and Women* (Princeton Book Company, 2003)
- *Conditioning for Dance* (Human Kinetics, 2003)
- *Inner Focus and Outer Strength: Using Imagery and Exercise for Health, Strength and Beauty* (Princeton Book Company, 2006)
- *Beautiful Body, Beautiful Mind* (Princeton Book Company, 2006)



A: We experience the world through both our minds and our bodies. So what you do with your body affects your thinking, and what you think affects your body. As soon as you think, *My arm is light as a feather*, it will be easier to lift; as soon as you think, *It is as heavy as lead*, you will notice the difference. The body follows the mind and vice versa.

Q: How does imagery work in your method?

A: A lot of methods use imagery. Mine is different because in order for it to work, the mental picture has to effectively fit the individual. There are many ways to use imagery, and a teacher should be aware of the great variety: biomechanical (“My pelvis reacts elastically to absorb force”), anatomical (“My lungs are free and expansive”), chemical (“My immune system is strong and healthy”), metaphorical (“My shoulders melt like ice cream”) and inside-outside the body (“My tailbone lengthens; I am floating in

lush Caribbean waters”). On top of those categories, there is imagery that fills up the space (global) or is just located in one place (specific) and imagery that uses difference sense modalities.

Q: What is the role of breathing in your system?

A: The point of breathing is to bring plentiful amounts of oxygen into the body. In the Franklin Method we review the evolution of breathing and ask ourselves: Why do we have a diaphragm? Why do we have abdominals? The diaphragm was created to allow for greater intake of oxygen for warm-blooded mammals. For this purpose the ribs were removed from the lumbar spine. The abdominals are intercostal muscles without ribs. They are an elastic body wall that acts in opposition (antagonistically) to the diaphragm. If your diaphragm is free, your breathing is deep and effective. The abdominals need to have good

tone, but they also need to lengthen and shorten liberally when we breathe, not be held in a position. No muscle likes that. Otherwise, why be a muscle in the first place? The body already knows how to breathe using this system. All we need to do is to take away the blocks, resistances and faulty postures. Once that’s done, breathing happens naturally and fully.

Q: You also use what you call experiential anatomy. Can you explain what that is and how you teach it?

A: Most anatomy is taught while students sit in a class, listen to a lecture and look at charts or a model. They don’t *experience* anatomy through their own bodies. You can’t change or learn through cognition alone; you need to live through the experience. When I teach anatomy, I have students touch their own bodies to identify points of movement, location of joints and some-

thing I call bone rhythms. Students learn how to *feel* the way their bones and joints are moving naturally in concert with each other. You can then understand the relationship among all bones and joints, which greatly benefits your posture, flexibility and strength. Strength is not only how strong your muscles are but how well your brain

the Franklin Method the outer form of the movement does not come as a priority—it is secondary to embodying good function. Certain principles are the foundation of healthy movement, and to my great surprise these are not taught in yoga, martial arts or even Pilates. These methods teach exercises with the mind part being more of an

your body image relates to your actual design, the better your function. Simply learning an exercise will not teach you this. Training does not make perfect—it makes permanent—and if you move with tension or bad posture, *that* is what you'll get better at. In the Franklin Method we improve by embodying healthy function, rather than

“During the Hundred, imagine floating balloons supporting your occiput and heels. This instructs your brain to release tension from your neck, shoulders and back.”

organizes your body for movement. In a badly synchronized joint movement, your own strength can go against you and cause injury.

Q: Can you give a concrete example of how your method might benefit a particular Pilates exercise?

A: Let's say you're doing the Hundred. There might be a tendency to strain your neck and shoulders or lift your lower back or tense it. When you incorporate the Franklin Method, you might imagine a floating balloon supporting the occiput [base of skull] and another balloon supporting the heels. By doing this, you're instructing your brain to release excess tension from your neck, shoulders and back.

Q: You've said that the Franklin Method is based on the knowledge that we have the power to change. But isn't that the basis for all techniques—Pilates, yoga, martial arts, and so on? How is your technique different?

A: Here's the difference: The methods you mention are all based on *outer* form. In other words, you can recognize Pilates and martial arts and yoga asanas by the look of the exercises. In

add-on, a way of cueing to help the shape or movement to be done “correctly” according to the founder of the method and variations created by a succession of followers.

Do not get me wrong: All this could be and has been beneficial to many. But I was always interested in how the body created health through movement *separate* from exercise. Most of human existence occurred before exercise was around. The Greeks most likely were the first to perform systematic exercise programs. But what about before that: Was everyone fat and out of shape? Obviously not. The body has certain built-in systems to healthfully deal with forces created by itself and its environment. Pilates and other disciplines do not teach these.

A perfect example is the concept of alignment. What is currently being taught is not how the body truly creates alignment. Alignment is a three-dimensional event that has little to do with bones being stacked or positioned in a certain position. Positional thinking can actually hinder rather than aid movement. What looks like a position is merely a moment when the three-dimensional forces of movement are balancing out another.

Here's the bottom line: The closer

imposing a set of ever-changing exercise opinions on a body. When you help someone embody function, they can change immediately. Using my method, students often change very fast. I've seen it happen in a matter of minutes.

Q: You seem optimistic and jovial. How important is it to be playful or to keep a sense of humor?

A: It's key. Students sometimes think they're learning more in classes that are dramatic and serious. But the opposite is true; they're just getting tense. Humor keeps you open, humble, receptive and relaxed.

Q: There's a manual that goes along with the training. What would you say is the most important page in it?

A: My personal favorite is the aphorisms page.

Q: Can you share a few?

A: Embodying function improves function. Balanced mobility creates stability. Don't solve problems; experience solutions. The best image is the one that discovers you. If you want to change your body, first change your mind. Your flexibility is only as good as your alignment permits. 