

# Portrait of Reuven Feuerstein

*His programs for culturally deprived, retarded, and autistic children have taken him 50 years to refine, but Reuven Feuerstein looks forward to making further breakthroughs in his quest to help "hopeless" youngsters grow and prosper.*

MARK F. GOLDBERG

Reuven Feuerstein has been touched by history. He has the bearing of an Old Testament figure, this aging practitioner/philosopher/scholar, with his oversize black beret, ready smile, insistent personality, and long, triangular, pristine white beard. Born into a poor but dignified family in Rumania, he spent his young manhood on a personal adventure that took him from a Nazi concentration camp to the back alleys of Bucharest to Israel, Switzerland, France, and Morocco. He survived tuberculosis in a time when most died from it. He has spent his life working with ruined people, most often children suffering from poverty, cultural deprivation, disease—often victims of a society gone mad.

For nearly 50 years now Feuerstein has worked with troubled youngsters, children from 70 distinct cultures, children considered not educable in any meaningful way. He has traveled throughout the world to meet children and work with them, and children have come from all over the earth to him. At first he worked with Holocaust survivors; later he worked with mentally and emotionally afflicted youngsters and children who were severely culturally deprived. "Whoever would see such children," Feuerstein remembers, "would immediately stigmatize and categorize them as impaired, organically

damaged, genetically disordered—you name it. These children were considered mentally defective."

But Feuerstein's irrepressible optimism steered him clear of despair; it allowed him to "center himself internally and form himself" into a person who could work with children and young adults and "see those children come out of the most terrible conditions to develop and mature and become able to function." One boy named Leror was unable to function after being rescued from a concentration camp. For three days he had been buried under "tons of corpses." With Feuerstein's intervention he not only survived but became a healthy person who developed interests in music and poetry. An autistic Italian boy he worked with, who would often "freeze for 10 minutes," is now an optician who plays classical music as his hobby. Time and again, Feuerstein has nourished hope in children considered retarded or autistic, helping them grow into fully functioning adults.

## Taking Children "Beyond Themselves"

Rather than pronounce such children hopeless cases, Feuerstein held a different perspective. "I consider these children modifiable. I don't have to categorize them in a way that will immediately

place them in an environment for sub-normal individuals." They may need encouragement and mediation that will allow them to move into the normal culture, but rarely are they hopeless.

Modifiability is the essential and undergirding tenet of Feuerstein's program. Feuerstein sees human intelligence as a plastic quality—not fixed. Many specialists assess a child's ability and conclude, he says, that "the child doesn't have abstract thinking. With this they close all the roads toward changing him. Well, we just don't accept it. Why doesn't he have abstract thinking? What is hampering the child?" Feuerstein has looked at children with IQ's in the low 60s, epileptics, children who were labeled autistic, children who were rated imbeciles, and determined that these children could be modified. The basic question he asks himself when he meets a troubled child is "What are the chances that this child can go beyond himself?"

An adult intervenor must offer purposeful direction, an approach Feuerstein refers to as mediated learning. It is not enough to provide a child with books and music; an adult must help the child to interpret and make sense of the materials, so the child can "go beyond himself." When a skilled adult tells a child about types of plants or trees, he is also helping the child to group, to make distinctions, to appreciate, to notice—to do all sorts of things that include, but also go beyond, technical knowledge of plants and trees. It is through mediated learning (method) and what Feuerstein calls instrumental enrichment (IE—the use of specific materials and exercises) that the youngster learns to organize, to see similarities and differences, to plan—to do the hundreds of things that promote effective learning.

In an anecdote worthy of a Zen mas-

ter, Feuerstein posed a question to me: "What makes a cup of tea sweet—the sugar or the spoon? It's a very difficult question. If it is the sugar, why do you need the spoon? If it is the spoon, why do you need the sugar? The truth is that it is the spoon that makes the tea sweet. Why do you need the sugar? So the spoon will have what to mix."

You may give the child books and tapes and educational games (sugar); but unless the adult provides hints, guidance, some direction (spoon), the tea (child's growth) will not become sweet. The child's independence must be respected, but it is in the nature of the adult-child relationship that the spoon must be put to skillful use or little sweetness will occur.

### A Different Kind of Assessment

Feuerstein's method of assessment is revealing. His Learning Potential Assessment Device (LPAD), rather than simply accepting the level of the individual's functioning as a predictor of how well he or she will always function, actually "produces changes in the individual—structural changes—which we consider a sample of the possible changes that can be produced in an individual—namely, modifiability." To watch the LPAD being administered is to watch a dialogue, a tutorial. The tester and testee interact to determine how the child learns and how and what the child might learn. The test includes hints, directions, questions—most of them framed at that moment by the highly trained tester.

The LPAD can take several days and up to 25 hours to administer. When youngsters are examined, the tester coaches the child to understand such concepts as right- or left-handedness or time. After 10 or 15 or more hours, it becomes clear how the child learns, what his deficiencies are, and what techniques might be useful in modifying him.

It is not easy to accept the revelations of this dynamic test. "You have to see

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it, experience it in order to understand it," Feuerstein explains. Take, for example, the case of a boy who is unable to attend to any task for more than two minutes. He has been labeled an epileptic with an IQ of 63. After testing him, Feuerstein says, "It turns out that we have a boy with an IQ of 158. He showed a capacity to learn with such rapidity. I gave him a very difficult attention test. He completed it with one error and with maximum precision."

### A Family Tradition of Service

The wellspring of Feuerstein's belief in these children resides in his individual passion: "You must believe that human beings can be changed. If you are really engaged emotionally as a human being, you will say, 'I have to. I must help. Change is possible because I want it so urgently.'"

Reuven Feuerstein's passion was nurtured in his childhood home by parents who took learning and helping others seriously. As a boy growing up in the small town of Botoshany, Rumania, he would read his mother's *Book of Prayers*, which was filled with history, poetry, legends, stories, and wisdom. Most important to Feuerstein, it was a "book salted with tears," a lesson in passion.

Feuerstein had eight siblings and slept in a room with four brothers. "In the middle of the room," he recalls,

"was a table, and on the table was a little oil lamp." At 5:00 A.M. his father would light the lamp and walk around the table saying his prayers, "and this sweet voice was waking us up."

His father was a counselor to the town's Jews, a man who made his home a center of family life, learning, and respect. "My father was the most powerful image," Feuerstein remembers, "People were literally standing at the door to get advice. This image had a strong impact on me." His father died in 1943. Reuven, then 22 years old, could not get to the funeral from Bucharest because the Nazis were in power. He had already spent one year in a working concentration camp in Transylvania. To go to another town, "you had to get all kinds of permits, permits from the police." Young Feuerstein, engaged in anti-Nazi activities and an effort to flee Europe, could not risk the encounter.

### A Move to Israel

In 1944, Feuerstein escaped from a brief second captivity and made his way to Israel. In Europe he had worked as a counselor and teacher with orphaned children of Holocaust victims, but with little advanced training and under terrible conditions. When he got to Israel, he went to a kibbutz, where he had an experience that was to be a turning point in his career. When the members of the kibbutz held an assembly to discuss a five-year plan, he realized the value of goal-setting. "I came from a place where you couldn't plan more than a minute. It was a real cultural shock. I learned to teach children to plan."

For the next four years, Feuerstein worked with children who had survived the Holocaust, Soviet youngsters, and culturally deprived children from Persia and Morocco. All needed a transition to a normal culture. During this period, Feuerstein "started to examine the great question of human modifiability. . . . Are there ways to modify individuals?"

## A Brush with Death

But before he could really get started on this path of inquiry, he contracted tuberculosis and was sent to a sanitarium. Pronounced incurable, he went to a Swiss sanitarium seeking a final determination. Both lungs were affected, and the Swiss specialist said definitively, "We can't help you."

The prospect of death taught Feuerstein a second great lesson: you do not have to accept conventional wisdom. The power of human belief is enormous. Feuerstein fervently "believed that I would make it. I wanted to live." So he simply harnessed the will to return to health and "disobeyed my doctors and went to study and work."

For the next seven years, he worked with children in Europe and Israel and studied in Geneva with Piaget, Inhelder, and Andre Rey. "During this period," he recalls, "I learned the essence of human modifiability and went beyond it to sketch a whole series of outlines for a theory that later became known as the Theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability." He regained his health, then went on to establish his world-famous clinic in Israel in 1955, the Hadassah Research Institute.

## Working with Down's Syndrome Youths

Now Feuerstein is applying his philosophy and techniques to Down's Syndrome youngsters. "You should see the Down's Syndrome children learning to become companions to the elderly. They undergo a training period of 18 months; they learn to cook, to buy, they learn to live totally independently."

The Down's Syndrome youngsters receive training during the day, but in the evening they stay in youth hostels with normal children from all over the world. "They meet with them at the table, talk to them, interact with them, making some nervous with their questions. They interact in a way that will make them sense reality, react to reality, cope with reality,



and be modified by reality." He worked very hard to close down the specialized environments for these children, where they were isolated from normal people—"It took me about nine years," he recalls.

## A Program for American Schools

In placing handicapped children in normal environments, Feuerstein feels educators in the United States have had only modest success. He believes that

American teachers do not yet have sufficient passion for working with afflicted children. "There is great interest, a readiness on the part of teachers. I do not always feel there is the spirit of urgency." It is not enough to train children for a few hours a day; he feels the work must be done with deep belief. And the children must spend a great deal of time in a normal environment.

Feuerstein believes the United States needs a visionary training program to



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completely integrate specialized and mainstreamed education. Teachers must "mediate the prerequisites of learning, of thinking, of behavior, of motivation, of self-image, of emotional affective ties that will enable the individual to benefit from existence in a normative environment."

For the past decade, Feuerstein has invested a great deal of energy in Curriculum Development Associates, an organization headed by Frances Link. "Our major target is not the child only, but the teacher first and then the child. I consider the training more important than the program." Teachers must come to believe firmly "that you can change people, that you can affect an individual meaningfully. It's not just training in a program. It's training in a whole philosophy, a whole way of looking at a child."

## "I Cannot Give Up"

Although he will be 70 this year, Feuerstein has neither reduced his work week nor stopped seeing children. "I am seeing almost daily three or four children," he says. But increasingly, he is putting his energy into writing about his program, sponsoring training programs, and getting people interested in his work. He wants to teach others his belief system and practices so that his work may outlive him. The elements of his program have taken 50 years to refine, and he expects that they will undergo continual change.

There is one constant, however, that this latter-day prophet presents as his refrain: "If you don't believe that human beings are modifiable, it's partly because you don't really need to modify them. You don't have a moral, affective, emotional engagement with your fellow human which will make you say, 'No! I cannot give up. It's not something I can give up.'"

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