

EXCHANGE

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Team Teaching the Alexander Technique at My Home-State University

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ATI Teaching Member, France

ORGANIZATION

West Virginia University's College of Creative Arts hired me for six weeks to complement their Alexander Technique teacher in the Department of Theater and Dance, who would be off most of the semester directing a play. My pupils were Theater Department graduate students with teaching schedules of their own from the very start of the school year.

My first class was shared with the teacher for whom I was substituting. Many Alexander concepts were introduced into the group work at the outset. These circumstances behooved that I organize my Alexander work with the group in such a way as to afford an opportunity to explore the Technique firsthand and one-on-one with me.

In my own learning of the Technique, I had found that it was most rewarding first to have the experience of freedom myself before getting an explanation of what principle I was encountering that F.M. Alexander had distilled. In my teaching at WVU, I found that I needed to create circumstances from the start that would be conducive to my pupils bumping into Alexander principles on their own! Constructive Rest provided a means for my students to experience their own stretch-reflex mechanism. This individual experience was complemented by my own selective use of "hands-on."

MATERIALS

The students corresponded with the other Alexander teacher via e-mail during her absence. These electronic journals were a course requirement.

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ATI Vision and Mission

To establish an open means of global communication for people to discuss, apply, research, and experiment with the discoveries of F.M. Alexander.

To foster the use of the F.M. Alexander Technique in social and environmental interrelationships.

To create a vital organization whose structure and means of operation are consistent with the principles of the F.M. Alexander Technique.

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From the Chair

*Catherine Kettrick
ATI Chair*

“We have to recognize, therefore, that our sensory peculiarities are the foundation of what we think of as our opinions, and that, in fact, nine out of ten of the opinions we form are rather the result of what we feel than what we think.”

We know that many times what feels right to us is not “right.” A new way of thinking that leads to a new way of moving can feel strange, unusual, and sometimes wrong. We see this happen all the time when we learn and teach the Alexander Technique.

In Alexander Technique lessons we are usually working with “physical” problems—a pupil has a stiff neck or a sore back, or wants to sing better. As our pupil learns the Technique, and changes how they move, they feel different. They may believe, for example, that they are hunched over, when they are standing naturally and easily. Or they may feel that their chin is on their chest, when their head is lightly balanced on the top of their spine. When we tell our pupil, “No, you are really standing straight up,” our pupil may not believe us at first—even if other people in the class say the same thing and even if they can see themselves in a mirror. If their new experience feels wrong, they are reluctant to believe. They don’t like it.

However, in Alexander Technique classes, we have an advantage: if our pupil comes in with a stiff neck or a sore back, and their neck or back starts to feel better, they are encouraged to continue. Even if this new way of thinking and moving feels strange and perhaps wrong, it feels better. And, eventually, it starts feeling “right.”

Now, as Alexander Technique teachers we know that there is no separation between the “physical” and the “mental.” So can a new way of thinking about a “mental problem” feel wrong? How do we know we are right in our opinions? How do we know we are right about what we believe? I think we know what is right because we feel right when we

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EXCHANGE

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think that way. And we may not even know that we are using our feeling of rightness to confirm what we believe.

In 2004, Dr. Drew Weston, a psychologist at Emory University,² studied 30 men who were strong Democrats or strong Republicans. Half of them supported Bush, the other half supported Kerry. He put them in an MRI scanner, which shows what happens in our brains when someone asks us to think about something or to do something.

Each subject in the study read quotes from both Bush and Kerry. The first quote showed each candidate (Bush or Kerry) showing support for a position that was popular with their followers (Bush supporting Kenneth Lay; Kerry supporting changing Social Security). Then each subject read quotes from Bush and Kerry where the two candidates reversed their first position. The Republicans reacted negatively to Kerry, and the Democrats reacted negatively to Bush, but each group judged their own candidate positively even when the candidate said something contrary to what he first said.

After the subjects read the contradictory quotes, the MRI showed increased activity in several parts of the brain. One was an area that regulates negative emotions; another was an area where the brain makes judgments about forgiveness. And one was an area where people feel relieved or rewarded. Areas of our brain where we “reason” were mostly quiet.

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It was a challenge for them to keep a record of an experience they had not had yet, but it freed me as a teacher to give them private lessons where tablework could complement the Constructive Rest we did each week.

Just finding the right support for the correct release of the head and neck in semi-supine position for each pupil took several weeks. Addressing this issue practically, I bought small balls to be held in the palms of their hands and pillows (small foam WVU Mountaineer team footballs) for the students in order to coax them into experiencing Constructive Rest as self-nurturing. For a student for whom taking time for herself was itself a problem, I bought a little egg timer. I used the fact I would be leaving as an opportunity to give these gifts as remembrances of me. My sly intention was to use them as a gentle reminder that the students should take time daily to take care of themselves via Constructive Rest.

INSPIRATION FROM ATI'S *EXCHANGE* AND ITS EDITOR

At the beginning of the course, I made reference to articles I had read that were published in *ExChange*. “Teaching Alexander Technique at Wellesley College” by Andrea Matthews (in the June 2004 issue, vol. 12, no. 2), and “Teaching without Touching” by Catherine Kettrick, plus the “Editor’s Page” and “A Brief Summary of the Principles of the Alexander Technique” by Andrea Matthews (in the June 2005 issue, vol. 13, no. 2). Since these were all graduate students teaching classes themselves, I shared with them the account of the importance of not always using one’s hands in conveying the essence of the Alexander work. This was especially useful in addressing the frustration of those students who felt group classes were not as useful as private lessons. As a fellow teacher, I was sharing with them honestly the difficulty of choosing the appropriate pedagogical method. I was honest with them about how the pedagogy has an impact on what you want to accomplish and how you go about it.

Since they were all actors working together in production rehearsal, I pointed out to them their respective movement qualities and behavioral dispositions that complemented one another. I used this as a demonstrative tool. When someone had a breakthrough—for example, the discovery of the freedom of the head and neck as a catalyst for a sense of psychophysical unity—I emphasized that it was like a virus they could pass amongst themselves. I showed them the working definitions from the “Principles” article written for the class at Wellesley College. I proposed to them that these definitions might be possible explanations for someone’s insight. If they hadn’t come up with a sense of unity or primary control personally, I could make reference to someone’s epiphany, explaining that good use is contagious. They had only to open themselves up to the discoveries of other members of the group.

PROCESS AND OUTCOME

How I had ended up home in West Virginia is a story in itself. My father suffered a mild heart attack shortly after discovering he required surgery to remove a cancerous tumor. The mission I undertook was to work with him daily to regain strength and learn to relax while preparing him for a precarious adventure on the operating table. I was able to secure a short-term, part-time team teaching job at WVU once it was clear that I would have some free time to engage in professional work during my stateside visit.

For nearly twenty years, I’ve run a production company that catalyzes collaborative dance and music performances touring internationally. This invitation to teach at WVU’s College of Creative Arts was my third tour of duty there, though the first one where my Alexander expertise was central to my pedagogical engagement.

A great emphasis in my Alexander training courses and in the Alexander literature I've read was placed on the relationship between a clarity of intention and the "means whereby." In general, "end-gaining" is frowned upon and considered a very negative and destructive reaction Alexander Technique helps to eradicate. But I should admit that, as an administrator, producer, and fund raiser for my various collaborative endeavors over the years, guaranteeing a result in the sense of "end-gaining" is an inextricable part of my job description.

...I had found that it was most rewarding to first have the experience of freedom myself before getting an explanation of what principle I was encountering....

In my attempt to apply consistently the Alexander principles to the reality of everyday decision-making in the practicalities that make my life as a dancer and choreographer possible, I spend a lot of time thinking about the relationship between ends and the means whereby. By virtue of my role as an

Artistic Director, I often find that I must ask these questions backwards from the way they are traditionally presented in the Technique.

Another couple of autobiographical details are relevant to understanding why I have been forced, through my circumstances, to think about how ends, goals, and objectives are connected to process and method of execution. In 2001, I collaborated with the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, bringing my French company for a residency and performance at Taliesin West, the headquarters of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation in Scottsdale, Arizona, after an earlier stint there teaching Alexander to the students. My mission there was to relate my creative endeavors to the overall concerns of this foundation; at that time, what was needed was to show how the school at Taliesin West could go beyond the personality of its founder in order to encompass a wider vision for the architecture of the future. On another occasion, when I was invited to dance at Paris's City Hall in 2004, the Deputy Mayor asked me to take as my theme the relationship of creativity to new technologies. My own objectives again had to coincide with the sponsor's mission. The issue of how specialized my artistic products have become therefore forces me to begin with the end result I have been contracted to achieve and to think backwards through how my process, rehearsal time, and budget can generate a quality approach to performing the task at hand.

So, instead of separating the categories of process and outcome here, I have put them together in this text because my experience is that they are often intertwined. My team teaching involved a limited contract over a short period of time. Clearly, my part was like a short link in the chain that was

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the education of these graduate students/actors. But Alexander teachers can benefit from what Frank Pierce Jones referred to as an expanded field of awareness, that capacity to see ourselves as part of a larger whole, a greater unity, thereby achieving an increased span of attention that steadily grows in us over the years via an engagement with the challenges we face.

The way in which I worked with the WVU students was to have an inextricable effect on the outcome. Setting goals in a lesson plan became problematic when I understood that I could not guarantee what would be learned until I had an opportunity to work with these human beings to see where they were at on that particular day. Moreover, how the means had an impact on the result was far more clear to the students than it was to onlookers.

The challenge of teaching at a state university was to make the argument that taking time out daily to do Constructive Rest was a necessity and not a luxury. At a conservatory, it would more likely have been a given that one's daily routine is part of building artistic and professional reflexes. It was an open question, however, among both students and faculty at WVU as to what actually constituted a creative process. Into that fragile opening I poured all of my experience and expertise.

Below, slightly edited for publication, is my account of my teaching, which I sent to the primary instructor at the end of my stint. The names of the students have been changed.

September 6, 2005

In the beginning of class I shook hands with Pat, Joe, Tom, May, Ellen, and Ed. We peeled off in groups of three for what were labeled "quickies," hands-on work standing up. The primary instructor worked with Ed, May, and Pat, while I worked with Ellen, Joe, and Tom. Ellen especially responded to the point I made about how a sense of touch extends beyond the simple physical task of putting hands on.

The fact that no one felt comfortable to laugh when I quipped that "quickies" are usually effective ways to get to know people made an impression on me. It is a challenge to create an environment where the student feels there is a sanctuary space in which she feels free to make mistakes and feel vulnerable, when the work is ultimately graded at the end!

Particularly comic was the ball-catching exercise where we were admonished to receive the ball softly. Yours truly made the biggest thud of all. I was the most tense person in the room, being afraid of balls! And I am ostensibly the expert in charge!

I was asked to fend for myself in finding a space in order to continue the last half hour of class, since the theater space in which we were working was taken up with a music class starting at 4pm. We left the building and found a comfortable, sunny place on the lawn. Pat lay down and I demonstrated on her what "Constructive Rest" would be for the entire class in the next session. I also demonstrated on May a sense of lengthening up as I brought her off the yoga mat.

After class, the primary instructor said that she would deal with the students about all the readings and e-mail journals and that I was to be the exclusive "body person," a funny reversal as I am often taxed with being too "intellectual" or "cerebral."

September 13, 2005

I wanted to make clear to the students my own unique motivation for my involvement with the Alexander Technique. For me the Technique is a way of seeing the world in and through movement. Moreover, it is a segue into dance from theater as well as theater into dance.

Michelangelo drawings I had photocopied from the Fine Arts Library at Harvard back in August were designed to demonstrate a number of points I needed to make. The torque in his sketches draws specifically on the psoas: the deepest and longest muscle closest to the spine that knits together the upper and lower parts of the body. The specificity of Michelangelo is his sense of the twist and winding of the deepest musculature as epitomizing the struggle of spirit made flesh in the human figure. In the sketches of Christ emerging from the tomb one can see how the torque of Christ's torso becomes the gravitational center for the scenographic blocking of Michelangelo's canvas.

I used this as an example of how such a quality of movement can be a building block for the overall visual impact and design. I made this point as a performer working in Europe, where visual perspective in theater is anchored in a history of painting. My point was that movement was the catalyst of this, and specifically the psoas in movement.

After 10 minutes of perpetual movement it was clear that half the class could not kinesthetically sense their arm joints as a necklace resting on their rib cage. So, after Constructive Rest I talked through "body mapping" of the arms. The arms connect loosely at just the one point on the rib cage: where the breastbone meets the clavicle. I liberated Tom's shoulders, Pat's head (or rather the muscles in the neck), and the pinched nerve in Ellen's back. Ed's knees are much better. May stopped moving when she decided she wasn't in good enough shape; I said getting her in shape was what I was being paid by the state of West Virginia to do! Pat said that the Constructive Rest brought out more problems of tension rather than energizing her as had happened in the session we had had last week impromptu on the lawn.

Next Monday (September 19) I have private 45-minute sessions with Ellen, Joe, and Pat. On Tuesday we have a regular session together; May has the key to set up blankets so the group can bliss out on their mats as soon as they lie down. I continue with private classes on Wednesday with Ed, May, and Tom.

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September 20, 2005

There was a schedule change I had not been made aware of. The blankets and “toys” (teaching materials and supplies) I needed to teach with in the freezing cold theater space I thought we would be working in took time, patience, and several trips to move back and forth, with us winding up back in the theater in the end. Finally we were able to bliss out on the yoga mats after the delay.

Once settled, we spent an enormous amount of time in Constructive Rest, looking especially at clavicular breathing. May had a time of it just lying still. Ellen just needed to get out of her skin. Tom had undergone a physical breakthrough: somewhere, somehow he'd made contact with his primary control and he'd gotten deeper to some primal stretch underneath the musculature. Joe got the knack for a sense of unity in his body; he looked “knit” together beautifully all of a sudden. Pat had a time of it getting the balance between being too relaxed and cold and alert and calling upon tension to warm herself up in Constructive Rest. We collectively limited the parameters of our endeavor. While it was interesting for the students to hear about my own motivation concerning movement, the Michelangelo examples were irrelevant to my students' experiences at this point. Our consensus was to focus the sessions by emphasizing private work. The focus is to limit body mapping and illustrative exercises to personal examples of specific physical breakthroughs in each of them.

October 4, 2005

The session began with the now-customary confusion about the location of the class. Even after having sent four e-mails! May, Ellen, a theater department colleague in charge of classroom scheduling, and the departmental secretary all had been informed of my desire to meet at first in the primary instructor's office. I'd been given a key to this office and told I could use it for private lessons. There is where I set up my massage table for Alexander table work. Here I kept my books, blankets, teaching materials and supplies: what I call my “toys.”

Pat came by this office to tell me where everyone was and where the new classroom was located. But I explained that I wanted to start out checking in with everyone in the office. The reason for this was to get a sense of where everybody was at so I could respond in the moment to that and not have to lug my toys, cassette player, and notebooks around from place to place. Everyone signed in on the clipboard and acknowledged that they had each worked with me in a private session, as required by established procedures. We discussed how they were and were not responding to the work of Constructive Rest. Some did it regularly. Others needed the class time on Tuesday to get it established in their schedules.

We discussed John Mortimer's reading of *Measure for Measure*, the play my theater grad students are working on. But at the same time, they explained that it was too early to work on integrating Alexander “activity” into their process as actors for this play. For me, this was a good indication that they grasped some concept of “inhibition”: the capacity to respond in a timely way instead of reacting immediately to a given stimulus.

The theater ended up being the space available for work. An atmosphere of safety and trust was built collaboratively. An implicit sense of communication welled up in the simple non-doing of lying on the floor together. I gave May a kitchen timer for her personal use since tolerating stillness in herself is a challenge at this stage.

October 11, 2005

After meeting together in the office, the six grad students and I trooped off to the Vivian Davis Michael Theater, which I remembered from many years ago and was pleased to know of its location in case it is my classroom again at some future date. The chairs were arranged in a circle. Speakers I brought from home were hooked up to a cassette player. As a class we listened collectively to a tape of Barbara Conable's book *How to Learn the Alexander Technique*. We listened to a description of what constitutes a position of mechanical advantage. I was able to demonstrate with the help of "Mr. Bones" (a plastic skeleton) the structure and function of the pelvis. I showed pictures of the pelvis and the spine drawn by David Gorman. Photographs of F.M. Alexander working in "monkey" were also shared. The students responded as a group to a very classical description of transitioning from having one's back against the wall to going into "monkey" as a position of mechanical advantage.

May was ill and participated by sitting continually in her chair. Tom visibly found the demands of this style of conscious stamina immensely painful. Everyone was relieved to finish by going to their mats and lying down in semi-supine position.

I talked through a classical protocol of giving directions in Alexander floor work while the students were lying down. The students were given a superficial introduction to "whispered ah." Little time remained in our session. Ed had expressed his interest in exploring how the diaphragm functions, but all I could do under the circumstances was to give him photocopies of Barbara Conable's explanation of three different areas involved in breathing (thoracic, abdominal, and pelvic), from a wonderful manual for musicians that had schematic drawings to help Alexander students understand their own body maps (*What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body*, Andover Press). I was unable to take the time to actually talk about the movement of the diaphragm itself. These three pages correspond to the initial way I introduced breathing in Constructive Rest at the beginning of my work with the students in the class I team taught September 6.

WHAT I LEARNED THANKS TO STUDENTS, COLLEAGUES, AND CIRCUMSTANCES

It is never a waste of time to question the relevancy of what we do as Alexander teachers. Challenging situations or challenges to our way of doing

Team Teaching the Alexander Technique

things should not be ignored or sloughed off as the irrelevancies of the ignorant. While I feel gifted, chosen, and privileged to partake in the extraordinary body of knowledge that is a vocation for me, I am not part of “an elect” or “in the know.”

The fact of not having a permanent place to teach in was symptomatic of a larger problem. The problem was that the department did not really know what the place was for Alexander Technique in its curriculum. Nor was there a secure feeling among my colleagues about the overall goals they envisioned for training their students for the theater. Out of this confused state of affairs, a funny netherworld emerged as an unfortunate byproduct. The lack of space became a ploy for trying to keep me feeling insecure in my own sense of place among my colleagues and peers. Here was a truly glorious challenge for myself.

At WVU I experienced a fascinating source of tension. On my side there was my determination to create a sense of safe haven for my pupils to witness change fearlessly in themselves. On the opposite end of the spectrum, my superiors and colleagues felt the necessity to reassure the university of the value and viability of the Alexander Technique by engraving lesson plans and course requirements in stone.

In retrospect, I would change nothing about how the situation evolved. As my beloved first Alexander teacher Tommy Thompson taught me, we meet people where they are, and not where we want or hope them to be. Cherished lessons often end up being those most difficult to learn. Those often come out of a conflict that cannot be avoided. Effective communication is not necessarily pleasant or comfortable.

My commitment to the Technique is inextricably linked to defending what I most love. I love the capacity Alexander Technique gives me to simplify things down to what is the essential for me in the midst of confusion. Not that the chaos of life ever disappears. Distilling what really matters in either the way we do things or the way we choose not to do them, this is a fantastic opportunity! I credit Alexander Technique with providing me with the choice that gives me courage. Making the decision in this situation to feel comfortable and at home in myself under these challenging circumstances is an example of this choice.

I love the capacity Alexander Technique gives me to simplify things down to what is the essential for me in the midst of confusion.

Accordingly, I was stubborn about providing my students with conditions conducive to an experience. I cannot guarantee what will happen. But my craft as a teacher requires me to come up skillfully with a series of possibilities wherein students as people can recognize what they came looking for from the Technique in the first place. My remembrance of successful past experiences gave me the staying power to remain with the problem itself. My past experiences have taught me that an eventual solution comes out of this, if you do not try to fix yourself or fix the other people involved.

Never would I have fallen in love with the Alexander Technique and maintained my commitment to it since 1978 had I not been absolutely convinced of its usefulness for me as an instrument of continual self-transformation. I feel that it is a means to be positive in the world. The more I teach, however, the more I feel I underestimate the difficulty of applying it as a means of doing good. It is not a means of change. Alexander Technique simply provides the possibility for change. My 84-year-old father immeasurably moved me, after his successful cancer surgery, when speaking to his doctor. We worked together daily for six weeks. "Clara is teaching me to think completely differently," said he, a lawyer, judge, and elected public servant for forty years. "It is a difficult thing to do."

If one might simplistically reduce the Technique to a moment of pause before the fight-or-flight reflex mechanism kicks in, I'd say I'm less inclined to run away or to fight anymore. This simple fact seems to have helped healing and inspired learning in myself and others. But I did not do anything for anyone. I mostly stayed out of the way, so something could happen. ☺

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A mind free to respond cannot help doing two things to whatever confronts it: it connects and it animates.

Stanley Burnshaw, The Seamless Web

In Practice: A Student's Semester Summary

*Nayantara Mukherji
Wellesley College, Class of 2006*

This year started off somewhat unsatisfactorily. I was having problems that I hadn't had as much last year, like sticking my head out and really quite serious jaw problems. I felt like I had forgotten everything I had learnt. I felt, too, like my voice was losing its alto quality, and that the high notes that I had been able to hit before were suddenly out of reach. I remember being extremely frustrated, and I was afraid to practice, or go to choir or my lessons, because I was just not satisfied with the results I was getting from myself. At some point in the semester, however, this suddenly changed. I can't exactly pinpoint when it was, but I just was not so worried anymore. Although it was frustrating, I'm really glad that I had this experience, because I now know that just because I may be taking a couple of steps backwards once in a while, this does not mean that I will never again go forward. I think that the process I've been learning (or unlearning) these last two years has been quite rapid and unfamiliar, and so it makes sense that on some level I would be trying to make a mad rush back to the old and familiar ways.

This experience was also incredibly useful for me because it made me realize that the more I stress about singing a certain way, the less I will be able to achieve. I kept "trying" to produce a specific sound that I thought I should have, but by making this effort, I was really only putting more stress on myself and making it harder for myself to sing. I kept trying to "sing like an alto," and make the sort of deep sound that I hear professional singers make. As I progressed through the semester, however, I've realized that it isn't possible to produce any kind of sound without first being completely free. This is a sort of anti-intuitive realization, because I had been trying to control the sound instead of "uncontrolling" the sound. I think I've managed to free up my singing a lot this semester (although there's always more I can work on), and next semester I'd really like to work on using this freedom to still produce a deeper, richer sound. At the same time, I think I'm noticing my sound more than I ever have before, so maybe the problem is not that I've lost my alto sound, but that I'm now in a position where I can have higher standard for myself.

The thing I'm really still having a problem with at this point is my jaw. I think, as a result of the stressful nature of this semester, it's been very hard for me to free up my jaw altogether. As I pointed out in my [use] journals, once I realize that I'm tightening it, it is much easier for me to let go. Without my consciously realizing it, though, my jaw seems to be stuck by default. It's a silly way to deal with stress, I know, because if anything, it's more stressful and painful. I'm not sure whether my jaw problem is worse than it was before, or whether I'm just noticing it more, but I definitely know that

Editor: Nayantara has been my voice student during her time at Wellesley, and has also participated in my Alexander class. At the end of this semester, despite the problems she describes here, she turned in a beautiful performance at her end-of-semester jury, at which the faculty all remarked on her vocal and physical poise. To me, her progress exemplifies both the difficulties that working too hard to get things right can cause and the thrilling, even heroic, effect of using that desire to allow the right thing to do itself.

it's something I want to work on. It seems like as soon as I get rid of one problem with the way I use myself, another one crops up somewhere else. So much of my semester is just spent tracking new problems and trying to figure out how to deal with them. I guess that at some point, however, my body is going to run out of tricks to play on me, and then I'll be home free.

Perhaps the most important thing that I've learnt this semester is that, as problems become smaller and more obscure, I have to keep checking in with myself to figure out what's going on. Also, I've realized that a problem never completely goes away. It's always lurking somewhere in the back of my mind, waiting for an opportunity to re-emerge. It's very easy to let certain issues go under the radar, and I have to keep consciously checking in with myself to try and figure out what's going on. I've learnt a lot from this process of constant questioning, and have been able to realize things about myself that I was not aware of before. Overall, I think I've learnt a lot this semester, and have felt far more empowered to deal with my problems instead of despairing over them. ☺



From the Budapest AGM 2005 (photo courtesy of Carol Levin)

Learning about and Working with Trauma in My Alexander Practice: My Experience of Self Regulation Therapy

*Raewyn Haywood Khosla
ATI Teaching Member, Texas, USA*

As an Alexander teacher I have a deep interest in mind-body health and its relationship to our quality of life. As many others are, I was originally drawn to the Alexander Technique as a way of positively enhancing the quality of my own life. Enchanted by my newfound lightness and sense of freedom, I began my training in 1996 and began teaching in 1999.

During the first five years of my teaching, I became curious about how to address the emotions and emotional issues that arose during lessons. I didn't feel very inspired to refer my students to therapy as a way of addressing issues. My own experiences in that area were very mixed. Even though I developed cognitive understanding of why I was the way I was, real change seemed slow, difficult, and sometimes even retraumatizing. I also felt uncomfortable at the splitting off of mind from body and working with each in parts. The traditional therapist's approach didn't sit comfortably with my own understanding of ourselves as whole beings.

It seemed as if there was gap in the picture. Why could some of my students run with the Alexander Technique and others not? What was in the way of everyone having a free neck? Why did some students move into freedom and ease and others experience significant pain and anguish during or after lessons? Why were some so present and others stuck and so reactive physically and emotionally? It felt like more than "habitual response" was going on here. I was fascinated by what each individual brought to the lesson and curious at what could lie at the core of the pattern of response I was seeing.

At about the same time I was noticing some less than positive situations in my own life. Despite my best Alexandrian efforts, or non-efforts, I was experiencing anxiety, insomnia, and a sensation of my ribs bearing down most uncomfortably.

Through conversations with Jeanette Stiles, a Self Regulation Therapy Practitioner in Seattle, WA, some pieces of the puzzle began to reveal themselves. The symptoms I was experiencing and those that I was seeing in my "difficult" students were consistent with her descriptions of a nervous system that has become dysregulated through shock or developmental trauma.

What does this mean? Our autonomic nervous system moves non-consciously through cycles of arousal in response to novelty or threat. We have all felt our heart rate escalate at an approaching vehicle that seems to be on our side of the road, or in the anticipation of attack by animal or human for example. These are signs of sympathetic arousal. The sympathetic system is one of the branches of the autonomic nervous system (ANS).

We share with animals an inbuilt ability to respond to situations of overwhelm. In the face of novelty or perceived threat, we move into a non-conscious response which our system has organized as best for our survival, namely flight, fight, or freeze. All of these involve the nonvoluntary movement into a "startle pattern" as our physiology gets ready to run, fight, or freeze. This happens before the neocortex has even made rational sense of what is happening. We also have the flexibility to return to homeostasis after the threat has passed, as the parasympathetic branch of the ANS does its job of calming us down.

Recent research suggests however that events that are extremely overwhelming to the nervous system can cause neurophysiological changes in a person that prevent them from returning to homeostasis. These events include anything that is “too fast, too soon or too much...events that interrupt the normal activation deactivation cycle.” Zettl & Edwards, *Foundation 1 Workbook*, p. 2 (unpublished). These can include falls, dental or surgical trauma, motor vehicle accidents, surgeries, loss or abandonment, attack, high fever, anaesthesia, war, or natural disasters, to name but a few.

Why did some students move into freedom and ease and others experience significant pain and anguish during or after lessons? Why were some so present and others stuck and so reactive physically and emotionally?

If the huge amount of energy mounted for our survival at the time of threat stays within the system, it causes the “container” of the nervous system to become more and more full and finally to “overflow” into symptoms that manifest both physically and emotionally. Some common signs of a “full” system include neck and back pain, anxiety, asthma, extreme tension in the

muscular system, TMJ dysfunction, insomnia, headaches and migraines, gastrointestinal difficulties, and a general lack of well-being. These are all signs of nervous system dysregulation.

Unresolved trauma also creates a state of fixity in a person, in both mind and body. The flexibility to respond to life’s events is narrowed as the system is constantly and subconsciously in an “aroused” state. A system that is in sympathetic overwhelm may manifest hypervigilance, panic attacks, TMJ dysfunction, insomnia, and exaggerated startle response. These people are often constantly on the go and may be prone to addictions, even over-exercising. I could see some of my students and myself clearly reflected in this list!

On the other hand, parasympathetic overwhelm can be seen in symptoms of depression, numbness, and exhaustion. In cases of severe dysregulation, illnesses such as fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, phobias and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can manifest.

What I was seeing in some of my students was consistent with dysregulation of the nervous system. The key here is that no matter how much we use our thinking to inhibit an undesirable response, if the system is dysregulated, it can be a very long and often losing battle. The neo-cortex, where we do our rational “thinking,” is the last to be involved in the chain of response to a

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stimulus. The reptilian and limbic systems are what are really organizing our most primal responses to life as well as our affect.

Although some modalities can teach conscious inhibition of the startle reflex, as do Alexander Technique and some types of meditation, I was intrigued by how a “full container” could be emptied, thereby restoring the nervous system to a regulated state and making it much easier to apply Alexander principles.

It was fascinating to incorporate SRT into the work I did with my students and watch as their “activation” levels dropped, freeing them from shock, thawing “frozen” areas of their bodies and minds, and allowing much more ease take place in their learning. I watched as people literally changed before my eyes, their faces coming alive, their singing voices freeing, hypervigilance giving way to peace. There were so many changes in my students and myself following SRT sessions that it is impossible to document in this article. All were positive and all involved shifting from fixity to flow, to an expansion of self and quality of life.

I watched as people literally changed before my eyes, their faces coming alive, their singing voices freeing, hypervigilance giving way to peace.

Self Regulation Therapy does exactly that: it regulates the “Self.” SRT works with “resourcing” the person, that is, bringing the person to a state of being that involves free breath, ease, and good feelings...all the yummy stuff. This state is known in SRT as the “healing vortex.” On the other side of the coin is the “trauma vortex,” a state in which we are tight, upset, stuck, breathless, etc. The art of SRT is in guiding the conscious awareness of the client gently and skillfully between the trauma vortex and the healing vortex, dipping into each in a way that is deceptively simple. The felt sense and the tracking of sensation is the primary, but not the only tool of SRT. Trauma is experienced in the body via sensation as, for example, dissociation, freeze, and pain. The practitioner’s own nervous system is the touchstone for this process, giving her feedback as to when to move away from or touch into a vortex. This “titration,” as it is known, allows the nervous system of the client to go into a state of “discharge” as trapped energies empty out, often through twitching, shaking, or heat. The body’s natural way of regulating after shock or overwhelm is accessed. During the SRT sessions the brain begins to renegotiate the familiar pathways of trauma and create new and better options and interrupting the procedures that have resulted in symptoms.

All of this happens in a highly contained environment that the practitioner provides, avoiding the client moving into catharsis or overwhelm or any

type of distressing reenactment of the trauma. The SRT practitioner works in such a way that he or she may never even hear the “story” of what has happened. This is not essential to, and in fact even can inhibit, the healing process of the nervous system.

It is impossible to convey in these few words all the complexities of Self Regulation Therapy or even to touch upon the developmental component of the work. Suffice to say that trauma has been a much misunderstood phenomenon, frequently still regarded as a life sentence with no possibility of parole. It plays a large part in many ailments of modern life that we take for granted as part of our landscape.

As a client and now a practitioner of SRT, I continually marvel at our profound ability to heal through the entrainment to the regulated nervous system of another human being. My hope is to bring awareness of this work to the Alexander community, so we may continue to learn about ourselves, our healing, and how to recognize and most effectively meet the needs of our students. ☺

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Self Regulation Therapy is taught by Dr. Lynne Zettl and Dr. Ed Josephs of the Canadian Foundation for Trauma Research and Education based in Vancouver, Canada. For more information and their teaching schedule, please visit www.cftre.com.

For further reading:

Levine, Peter. 1998. *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Rothschild, Babette. 2000. *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Scaer, Robert. 2001. *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation and Disease*. New York: Haworth Press.

Shore, Alan. 1999. *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The neurobiology of emotional development*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

The essence of hospitality is located not in a warm smile and hearty handshake but in the ability to create a meaningful shared space in which our attentions and intentions are aligned.

Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey
How We Talk Can Change the Way We Work

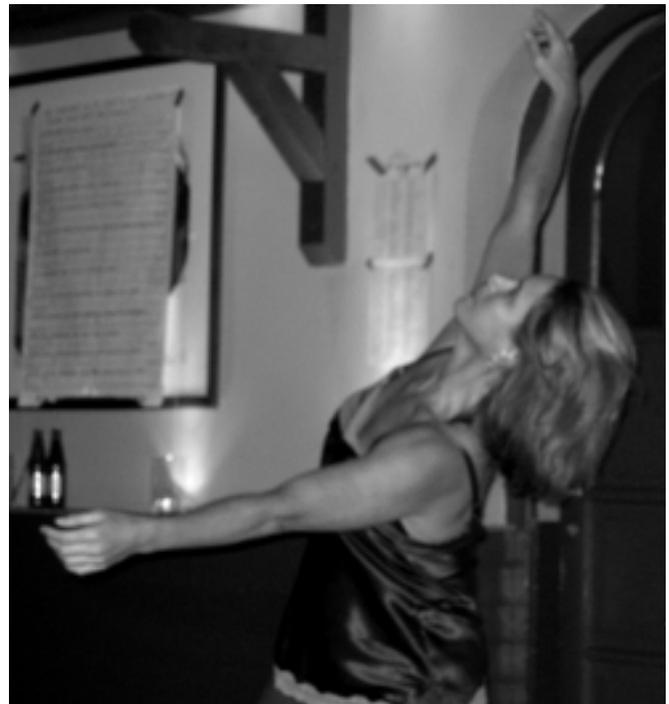
Scenes from the 2005 AGM in Budapest, Hungary



*Left to right: Véronique Druesne, Jennifer Mizenko, Stephanie McDonald
(Photo courtesy of Jennifer Mizenko)*



Folk dance demonstration (Photo courtesy of Jennifer Mizenko)



Jennifer Mizenko (Photo courtesy of Carol Levin)



A touch of the East! (Photo courtesy of Carol Levin)



Rosa Luisa Rossi and friends (Photo courtesy of Carol Levin)



Elisabeth Walker and Tommy Thompson (Photo courtesy of Alice and George Pryor)

Professor John Dewey on Posture

“Recently a friend remarked to me that there was one superstition current among even cultivated persons. They suppose that if one is told what to do, if the right end is pointed out to them, all that is required in order to bring about the right act is will or wish on the part of the one who is to act. He used an illustration, the matter of physical posture; the assumption is that if a man is told to stand up straight, all that is further needed is wish and effort on his part, and the deed is done. He pointed out that this belief is on a par with primitive magic in its neglect of attention to the means which are involved in reaching an end.

“A man who has a bad habitual posture tells himself, or is told, to stand up straight. If he is interested and responds, he braces himself, goes through certain movements, and it is assumed that the desired result is substantially attained; and that the position is retained at least as long as the man keeps the idea or order in mind. Consider the assumptions which are here made. It is implied that the means or effective conditions of the realization of a purpose exist independently of established habit and even that they may be set in motion in opposition to habit. It is assumed that means are there, so that the failure to stand erect is wholly a matter of failure of purpose and desire. It needs paralysis or a broken leg or some other equally gross phenomenon to make us appreciate the importance of objective conditions.

“Now in fact a man who can stand properly does so, and only a man who can does. In the former case, fiats of will are unnecessary, and in the latter useless. A man who does not stand properly forms a habit of standing improperly, a positive, forceful habit. The common implication that his mistake is merely negative, that he is simply failing to do the right thing, and that the failure can be made good by an order of will is absurd. One might just as well suppose that the man who is a slave of whiskey-drinking is merely one who fails to drink water. Conditions have been formed for producing a bad result, and the bad result will occur as long as those conditions exist. They can no more be dismissed by a direct effort of will than the conditions which create drought can be dispelled by whistling for wind. It is as reasonable to expect a fire to go out when it is ordered to stop burning as to suppose that a man can stand straight in consequence of a direct action of thought and desire. The fire can be put out only by changing objective conditions; it is the same with rectification of bad posture.

“Of course, something happens when a man acts upon his idea of standing straight. For a little while, he stands differently, but only a different kind of badly. He then takes the unaccustomed feeling which accompanies his unusual stance as evidence that he is now standing straight. But there are many ways of standing badly, and he has simply shifted his usual way to a compensatory bad way at some opposite extreme.”

John Dewey was an American philosopher, educator, and psychologist. He was the founder of the school of philosophy known as pragmatism, and his ideas had a profound impact on American education. This excerpt is taken from a chapter entitled “Habits of Will” in his 1921 book, Human Nature and Conduct.

The “friend” mentioned in the first paragraph was F.M. Alexander. Dewey wrote the introductions to three books written by F.M. Alexander and was a great supporter of Alexander’s work—now commonly called the Alexander Technique.

Reprinted with permission of Robert Rickover from his Posture Page website: <http://www.posturepage.com/alexander/dewey/index.html>



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The Fairway Within: Golf for the Body, Mind, and Soul

Peter Lightbown and Cecilia Croaker

Australia: Scribe Publications, 2004

ISBN 1 920769 331

225 pp., B&W illus., ppbk., with index, \$32.95 (\$29.66 at

books.boomerangbooks.com)

www.thefairwaywithin.com

Reviewed by Richard White

I am not a golfer. I've taken a few lessons and played a few rounds with my wife but I don't know much about the game. I do know that there are a lot of books, teachers, and ways to go wrong, so it's a good laboratory for Alexander Technique. I came upon this book when we were planning a golf vacation and it looked like it had possibilities although the cover would lead one to expect some new age, spiritual approach to the game, rather than the concrete advice I wanted.

Lightbown says early on, "golf tips, to my mind, are futile attempts to trick the golfing gods into yielding up their secrets. Rather, I am convinced that a transformation has to take place on the inside: a movement away from copying and towards the creation of an environment that allows the golfer's unique swing to blossom." The book delivered on this pretty well for me.

A lot of what follows is fairly straight implementation of principles from AT and related disciplines. Lightbown begins with a discussion of balance, relaxation, and rhythm, and their interrelationships. It would appear that most golf instruction does not emphasize the role played by body awareness. If that's the case, he's onto something big. The presentation of stance is extremely detailed and sets the tone for the rest of the book. The author gives precise instructions for getting release in the neck, hip and knee, with many photographic illustrations and advice on what a good stance feels like.

The golf club itself doesn't make its entrance until somewhere around page 50. I tried to imagine a week of lessons with this guy—you might finally get to take a swing at the ball on the third or fourth day. Here again there are precise and well-illustrated instructions on how to recognize and execute an effective grip. I found that Lightbown's advice here was very much in line with that of the golf pros during our lessons. There's an extensive discussion of the physics and physiology of the swing. Since about the only thing I knew about golf was "keep your eye on the ball," I found the following to be especially perceptive and helpful: "Pupils often ask me whether they are to keep their eyes on the ball until they have hit it. My answer is that if you are in a state of balance your eyes will naturally and effortlessly be on the ball,

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but at no stage should you try and keep them there, since to do so would engage the neck muscles in the act of keeping the head still and throw your body off balance as a consequence.” I have not been able to develop anything approaching consistency in my swing in the few times I’ve played, but when I was able to put everything together I amazed myself. On the other hand I seem to miss the ball altogether pretty often. At least I’m beginning to understand what diabolical forces are in play when that happens.

Although the advice is very sound, I believe that the presentation might be improved by the use of drawings rather than photographs in some cases. The distinctions being shown are very subtle and not so evident to the untrained eye. Drawings would show more exaggeration of flaws than photographs do.

In many ways this is a book about the Alexander Technique using golf as an example, and I’d recommend it to anyone who’s studied AT as a gateway to golf. The weekend player who’s trying to improve his game should be warned that he may have to reinvent his game in the process of understanding Lightbown’s message. There’s a great deal to process in this book and much of it is not about golf at all. Then again, much of golf doesn’t seem to be about golf, either. There’s all that walking too, and each step is another opportunity to get it right. The game may not have to be “a good walk spoiled” if the walking itself is good.

My role in this game may turn out to be caddy.

Recommended. ☺

The Elements of Skill: A Conscious Approach to Learning

Theodore Dimon, Jr.

Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2003

ISBN 1-55643-476-6

224pp., B&W illus., ppbk., with notes & index, \$12.95

Reviewed by Andrea Matthews

In this book, Ted Dimon poses this basic, and critically important, question: why do so many fail at learning complex skills, and what can be done about it? As he expresses it, “...I want to explain first why beginners fail to learn, and to discuss the widespread and faulty ideas about teaching and learning that contribute to such failures; and second, to present a new approach to learning skills based on an understanding of the mental and physical processes that govern how we learn.” (p. xvi) He sees this failure as a flaw of teaching rather than of students, and writing from observation and personal experience of failures and successes in learning, he incorporates his training as a student and teacher of the Alexander Technique, as well as his doctoral study in education, in proposing a program for successful teaching of complex physical skills. Along the way, he draws specific examples from activities such as driving, playing tennis or a musical instrument, and singing.

His “entirely new approach to learning” (p. xix) is “based on the principle not of doing but of awareness and attention to oneself as the most crucial element in learning.” (p. 1) Now, as we Alexander teachers all know, this is hardly new, but rather over a century old, at least in the Western world; it can be argued that it has far older roots in

the East, and indeed, there are numerous references to the martial arts in the book. F.M. Alexander developed his method and employed it in private lessons, and also in the Alexander Trust Fund School in Kent, England and Stow, Massachusetts (USA) before and during WWII, and similar work has continued worldwide to the present day. It may (alas!) be quite novel to the audience to whom Mr. Dimon is reaching out, presumably education professionals at all levels and, in particular, teachers of specific skills, such as instrumental playing and sports. Interestingly enough, I have recently encountered something analogous in the guitar pedagogy of Aaron Shearer, whose most recent volumes, *Learning the Classic Guitar*, Parts 1-3 (Mel Bay Publications), outline such a program of meticulous non-doing. (A student of mine introduced me to Shearer's work, which he credits with saving him from career-threatening focal dystonia.)

Mr. Dimon's program calls for a very high level of "sticking to principle," admittedly rare in specific skill instruction, and still daring enough in Alexander circles. When I read his breakdown of the steps (the "elements of skill") involved in a pianist working toward playing a musical phrase, I'm reminded of stories of master teachers who didn't let their students get away with any lack of "thinking in activity," but instantly made them stop, only allowing them to proceed in small increments and only so far as they could remain calm, integrated, and fully present (for example, Margaret Goldie and Marj Barstow). It calls for what we're already doing, but to the hilt.

Since his program draws heavily on the principles of the Technique, I can't help remarking on one odd quality of the book: perhaps he is just avoiding writing yet another book on the Alexander Technique, but he seems to be at some pains to avoid naming Alexander and the Technique, at least in the text proper (after mentioning his training in the introduction, the next mention is in the endnotes), or to use any Alexander jargon. Sometimes he has to resort to some contorted language to avoid saying things such as "faulty kinesthesia" or "inhibition." One can imagine an advisor having said, "Leave out all that Alexander stuff, so the book will appeal to a wider audience."

A CHALLENGE TO THE REVIEWER

Great books and lousy books are equally easy to review: you praise and promote the former and you suggest the others be chucked. A book like *The Elements of Skill*, however, takes work. I've read it, re-read it while flagging important points, outlined it, and annotated my outline (to the tune of 40 pages of notes and pulled quotations), because I had a perplexingly difficult time putting my finger on what works and doesn't work about it, and I want to be fair. It's because I think Mr. Dimon presents the problem and its roots

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so very well, gives us the skeleton of a solution, and is clearly passionate about it, and because I myself feel the issues he raises are so important, that I felt compelled to spend so much time puzzling out my objections. It's true that many of my initial objections were answered or modified in the course of my immersion, but I can't help feeling it shouldn't have taken quite that much work.

Basically, I think his argument, including his proposed pedagogical approach, is sound, and in the main, well expressed. But in numerous places (particularly in places where I felt he was really onto something), I ran into what I felt were imprecisions in the use of language that distracted or confused me (or gave me to think a non-Alexandrian reader might be). Perhaps I am hypercritical in this area, and other readers might disagree; I can only give a couple of examples and suggest that you decide for yourself.

Right at the moment we need absolute clarity—when he introduces an unfamiliar idea, or an all-too-familiar idea in a new way—he mixes his message with other ideas, fails to be sufficiently succinct, or rounds off his point with a too-quick summation or vague expression, allowing the uninitiated reader to slide off the narrow path of the new and miss his real point. Readers will gravitate to what they recognize, and tend to convert new ideas to old, familiar ones; it's critical to be the most precise at those points in one's argument where the unfamiliar is introduced. Here is an example from the introduction to the book:

“Along with the inability to break skills down [to their constituent elements] goes the problem of trying too hard, which prevents the child from discovering the various elements that make up a skill. Few people, when learning something new, want to stop and think about what they are doing, to experiment, to play with different approaches. We want to improve quickly, and we fail to realize that learning a new skill demands, first and foremost, the courage to try something we've never done before. Often it is the act of not trying, of stopping and thinking, that is the key to learning. The key to doing something is to stop doing it as you have always done it.” p. xviii

Yes, trying too hard and undertaking too much at once are obstacles to learning. But why does he go on to suggest that the solution might be trying numerous other ways (“to experiment, to play with different approaches”)? For someone unfamiliar with AT, but aware of “progressive” systems of education, it might bring up associations of Montessori or other methods that encourage students to learn through trial and error. Some of these systems (including one used locally for teaching math, with disastrous results) are quite problematic and controversial; the reader might react strongly and negatively to this association. My guitarist student feels strongly that just such an approach to teaching contributed to his focal dystonia, requiring painstaking retraining; our discussions have definitely sensitized me to this issue. On the other hand, lacking that association, the reader may get the sense Mr. Dimon is suggesting one ought to think up different approaches and try them out, much as the frustrated golfer tries out different grips or clubs. As the book goes on, it becomes clear he doesn't mean that sort of experimentation, but still he brings up the concept repeatedly, adding to the murkiness.

With that buildup, the last sentence in the above quotation seems to continue the emphasis on trying something new, when it actually says something quite different, an idea that is perhaps the most important of the introduction and even the book: Stop. Stop doing what you're doing, and see what you're doing and how you're doing it; then a new and better approach may emerge. By the time we get to that final sentence, we may entirely miss that he means that the “how” must change, rather than the “what.” The average reader is eagerly looking for the new “what,” since that's all he knows, and he's just been confirmed (or allowed to confirm himself) in the validity of his quest, instead of being slapped (kindly) in the face with the cold, wet fish of a really new idea.

In the very next paragraph, he again lays out a cogent argument that if we don't account for harmful habits we bring to learning, then the attempt to perform the skill will only aggravate those habits and increase the likelihood of failure. Brilliant! Anyone who is paying close attention can get this, even if it is a bit challenging to fully absorb its import without experiencing it at work. His language is crisp and allows little wiggle room for the reader. But then he goes on to say: "In order to address this problem, we must make the process of learning more conscious by gaining an improved control over action." (p. xix) Gee whiz. How is "improved control over action" going to be interpreted by the average endgainer? I can just imagine what my voice students would do with that.

I'm incredibly sympathetic to Mr. Dimon's aim here, but that is just too big a Heffalump Trap to ignore. Before he uses such an expression, we need him to redefine control, because the concept of it implied in the book is so different from that held by most people, and because it is so critical to the program of learning he is advocating. This issue of what control really is and is not continues to haunt the book, and leads to some fogginess later on when he goes to explain how habits in skilled action can be changed. And in fact, we don't get a clear statement of what that sort of control might involve until the end of the book (and even then, it's rather indirectly phrased): "This [clear] thinking, this grasping of the 'content' of what is to be done, controls the actual performance and therefore represents the 'positive' component of the process." p. 177

Here is another example of what tripped up my reading: "Often when we are having trouble learning to do something, we focus on what we have to do—on things we must positively learn—when in fact that problem isn't what we can and cannot do; the problem is something in us." (p. 3) This sentence starts out so well, and I know he intends to go on and tells us what that "something" is in the rest of the book, but the setup is so clear and the reader's interest is piqued. Why not say something more concrete than "something in us" right here and now, in the teachable moment? The gap has been created in the reader's thought. If he doesn't fill it now, the reader will fill it with his own familiar idea: "oh yes, there's something wrong with me...but I still don't know what it is." But it isn't "something in us"—at least not in the way the reader is thinking, like an appendix, or being a klutz (i.e., something that seems structural or innate). It's how we're thinking and how we're using ourselves. Say it now, before the reader's assumptions are reinforced by omission!

I realize this is just the introduction and opening of the book, but the reader's first impression of the argument is likely to be the one he takes away, and the pattern continues throughout the book. I'm not sure how I would

do it myself, but I can't just hand such a book to one of my students without caveats, and that's partly what I'm in the market for.

Overall, he organizes his thesis well, writes fluidly, and recaps his points frequently for the reader to follow it more easily. But it's precisely because Mr. Dimon does so often come so close to saying what needs to be said, that I sometimes find the book frustrating. His initial descriptions of the program of learning are not as succinct as later ones, often drifting toward urging "freedom to experiment," when it later becomes clear that the underlying approach needs to be extremely meticulous in structure (even though it may seem tedious or even rigid to the eager endgainer).

In a section on experimenting, he points out that trying things out is part of learning. Usually this trying takes the form of "trying to get it right," which is not experimenting, it's "just plain trying too hard." (p. 13) At this point he again seems to oscillate between experimenting ("coming up with new ways of approaching activities we find difficult" (p. 13)), which still sounds here like mucking around, and breaking down the learning into manageable bits (in the next sentence). In any case, he says we don't do the latter, because we feel "we ought to be able to perform without resorting to special simplified techniques." (p. 14; more on this observation about assumptions below) However, he continues, "Experimenting means we must give ourselves the freedom to be wrong." (p. 14) As long as one thinks of experimenting as mucking about, an alternative reading of this last statement—one much more to the point—eludes the reader: that experimenting *is* the act of giving ourselves the freedom to be wrong (not the freedom to pursue different versions of "trying"), to pursue a process that is not about getting the result or feeling right, but about seeing what is actually happening and what needs to happen next.

Here is another example of a great start and a distracting finish: "But to practice intelligently means, first and foremost, to refrain from blindly trying and instead to approach problems thoughtfully, finding clever and novel ways of doing things." (p. 22) The suggestion of cleverness and novelty is fraught with temptation for endgainers, I fear. I know he means that when one refrains from mindless repetition and trying, new and creative solutions present themselves, but that is not what most readers will hear in the conclusion of that sentence.

Mr. Dimon does a fine job of laying out in detail what is not working in modern pedagogies for skilled activities and why. Much of this will be very familiar to an Alexandrian audience, so I won't elaborate here, but a good restatement of these issues is always worth reading. I'm not sure how successful he is in his second aim of offering an "entirely new approach to learning," that is, how this change is to be put into practice. At first I thought it was the fault of the program itself, but after my re-reading, I suspect it has more to do with the book's structure. In some ways, the book seems either too short or too long: too short to show the design of a learning situation in complete detail, or too wordy for the very spare outline of his suggested procedure to really jump out at the reader with crystal and unmistakable clarity, without any gaps. The book seems to me to run the risk that the reader who isn't already familiar with what he's talking about will miss key points of his argument.

A gap of this sort struck me most forcefully in his section on breathing and singing. Here he says: "if [the student] simply brings the vocal folds together, the air, which is flowing in and out of the lungs, will cause them to vibrate, and sound—like the breathing itself—will occur automatically." (p. 171) He then reiterates this, with essentially the same wording. Carefully considered, this is a nonsensical oversimplification, although I think I know what he's driving at. If the vocal folds simply come together, the breathing simply stops and there is no sound. The vibration of the vocal folds, while indeed a reflex response, is a whole other issue, requiring a certain tonus, a certain conceptual input from the brain (pitch, vowel, volume), and sufficient energy to set the folds in motion (whatever is needed to match the demands of the pitch/vowel/volume concept). This is not to say any of this can or should be "done," but

by omitting this information, the statement is incomplete as a description of what needs to happen, and tends to make the reader wonder about the accuracy of the rest of his argument. Yes, vocalization happens without “doing,” but it doesn’t happen without *thinking*. This omission makes it impossible to follow his protocol, and leaves the reader adrift.

Another sort of gap appears in his discussion of a tennis student. In an extended passage (interspersed with commentary that is relevant and interesting, but which distracts the reader a bit from following the program itself), he has broken down the activity into manageable bits for the student to master:

- a. she should stop the “trying to hit the ball”;
- b. she should instead observe where a ball bounced off a wall hits the racket face (i.e., simply seeing what is actually happening, which leads one to allow a natural adjustment of the racket to match one’s intention—this, by the way, seems to be the true “experimentation” he is so insistent upon);
- c. then, she can observe what actually makes the ball move, which he says will lead the student to discover that she can shift her weight at the moment of contact, thus transferring force to the ball in a “static backhand,” rather than trying to do it by swinging at the ball;
- d. then, she can allow her racket to move forward to meet the ball, the energy of the forward shift of weight now being transmitted to the ball via the swing of the arm. (pp. 143-160)

Only then does he come to a discussion of the underlying coordinational issue of the stance necessary to the weight shift, the crouch (which we might call the “position of mechanical advantage”). The reasons for not addressing coordination first here are not quite clear to me, but in any case, once faulty coordination is corrected with the help of a “skilled teacher” (presumably an Alexander teacher), the student is simply to “maintain this use” when going into the activity. “The student must assiduously avoid the old idea of how to perform the movement, putting aside the desire to do it as she has always done it, while focusing on coordinating herself in new way as she prepares to perform the act [of swinging the racket].” (pp. 160-161) While this is an accurate description of what is *needed*, I think it drops the ball on saying precisely *how* the student is to maintain the new use at this critical (and unfamiliar) juncture, when the stimulus to habit is so great, as he points out himself. We need to be reminded what she is to constructively attend to here in order to maintain her coordination, rather than just what to avoid.

He properly stresses the importance of “conductive conditions” for learning:

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“a quiet environment, time to think about what we are doing, and a break-down of the process into manageable pieces that make it possible to learn in stages.” (p. 11) “We take charge of the learning process by taking charge of how we conceive what we have to do. When we have learned how to present problems to ourselves in a manageable way, we have learned how to learn.” (p. 12) This is admirably clear, but then repeated suggestions that the student “try things out” still confuse the issue at this point. It isn’t until the second half of the book, which presents applications of the program to specific activities, that we really begin to see how detailed the approach must be. What sometimes sounds like simply “reframing” the activity (i.e., a suggestion to do something other than the original task) in the first half of the book, is revealed to be a full stop and only then a clear breakdown of the overall task into steps that are as small and uncomplicated as the particular student needs them to be in order to proceed without fear or confusion of any kind. Looking back over the book, one can see this is what Mr. Dimon had in mind all the time, but it needs to come across with complete clarity from the first, I think, in order to get through the reader’s assumptions.

To detail all the little objections I have to things in the book would probably be overkill; they don’t damage the validity of his suggested program for learning, but they do distract from it, which is unfortunate.

Despite my quibbles, I do find that Mr. Dimon expresses many important ideas very deftly. Here is a selection I hope gives you the flavor of his style:

“Skill is not so much a matter of reproducing certain movements as it is knowing what to pay attention to, how to intelligently break down problems, and how to direct one’s own bodily activity through conscious awareness.” (p. xxi)

“It is the teacher’s job to provide the structure necessary for intelligent practice; it is the student’s job to internalize this discipline and to become his own teacher.” (p. 23)

“Effortlessness, not virtuosity, is the hallmark of skill.” (p. 30)

“When seen this way, the action of walking requires not so much a series of active movements as an unimpeded activity of underlying reflexes combined with a simple decision to allow the activity to begin—all of the subsequent movements taking place, if you let them, completely by themselves.” (p. 34)

“Many difficulties, in fact, can be traced to a failure to isolate and master the individual elements that make up complex skills.” (p. 52)

“The key to smooth performance in each of these situations is not to gain greater specific control but to restore the basic pattern governing movement.” (p. 79)

“The true test of good teaching is whether every child is learning, not just the talented. If that is not happening, then the style and method of teaching are basically faulty.” (p. 93)

“By learning to recognize the increase in tension and to restore the balance of the entire system, one can release the physical tension and prevent the anxiety response.” (p. 99)

“By learning to focus our attention constructively and to be kinesthetically aware when engaged in activity, we can prevent the stress response and remain poised in the most demanding circumstances.” (p. 101)

“...no amount of practice can overcome the harmful influence that the student’s manner of doing exerts on his performance.” (p. 119)

“Practice becomes a process not of overcoming difficulty with more effort, but of making what is difficult easier.” (p. 180)

FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION

He brings up some issues that could be profitably pursued in greater detail, such as the influence of a person’s assumptions on his or her behavior. In the discussion of experimentation above, I noted that he briefly alludes to the impact of students’ beliefs about what they should focus on or feel: that their ability to approach a task reasonably (e.g., in small steps or without efforting) is limited because they assume they *should* feel themselves making an effort, that they shouldn’t need to simplify the process, or that “if we do not actively focus on our goal, we will somehow lack the drive to achieve it.” (p. 112)

He doesn’t follow up systematically on this critical topic, focusing instead on habit as a tendency to interfere with the poise of the head and neck as if that were what the student is “doing” rather than the result of what he’s actually doing. But now that David Gorman has pointed out that a person in fact does not “tighten his neck” but rather does the activity, in the course of which something else happens that *necessitates* tightening at the neck (and subsequent tensions) to prevent his falling over, I find this sort of classic Alexandrian description much less satisfactory. Quite simply, the instant the person is not balanced over his feet during the movement, these tensions *must* appear. He is likely then to assume from this experience that he has to “work” to do the activity, thus perpetuating the movement that puts him off balance, so he indeed has to work, which reinforces his assumptions—the vicious circle of “doing.”

Another extremely interesting question is only hinted at in the book, one I would like to see much more discussion of here or elsewhere. He notes that “eliminating harmful tensions facilitates performance, but does not provide positive knowledge of how to sing or play an instrument...But these technical aspects of performing should be subordinated to the principle of attending to the self in action.” (p. 132) He acknowledges that concrete suggestions from the teacher may occasionally be useful, but finds that most such suggestions merely focus the student on how to be right, are positively harmful, and should be far rarer than they usually are in teaching. Since I first began to understand the ramifications of the Technique in relation to my own singing, I have tried to sort out where the Technique ends and

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technique begins, as it were. When one is well-coordinated and fully psychophysically available to the task at hand, what (if any) technical information remains to be imparted? Sometimes it seems a vanishingly small, yet somehow essential amount.

Following Mr. Dimon's program, three things occur to me in this regard:

a. many technical aspects of the skill become implicit in the choice of "manageable steps" selected by the teacher and suggested to the student to "experiment" with, and

b. the teacher is then confronted with a choice about how long to wait for a student to "discover" a technical principle (one might say "necessity") via this process. In relation to the tennis student, for example, how can Mr. Dimon be sure the student will discover the weight shift that transfers force to the ball? And how long should a teacher wait before coming in with a hint? Perhaps the teacher need only wait for the "teachable moment" when the student is fully engaged with the question and psychophysically poised and receptive, and should not wait until the student loses interest or becomes frustrated, but then should only give just the bit of information needed for the student to continue her experimentation.

c. in any case, it is crucial to strip ideas of "how" something is to be done from suggestions of "what" that something might be, which is, as Mr. Dimon points out, in contrast to the way technique is usually taught.

For example, many vocal methods attempt to exert control over vocal quality directly through manipulation of the vocal and breathing apparatus, such as "placement" of the voice or "breath support," prescribing a "how" that trains the student to actively "help" (i.e., interfere). In contrast, Cornelius Reid (in books such as *The Free Voice*) reduces the essence of singing to a concept comprising a pure vowel, a certain pitch, and a certain intensity, assuming this concept engages a whole self that is fully psychophysically coordinated and energetically committed. Because this involves many variables within the student, such a course of instruction is infinitely varied, but singing is seen as basically a very simple (concept-guided, but highly reflex-facilitated) activity. It's possible, of course, that other activities that appear to involve more "voluntary" movements have a more elaborate skill set to sort out.

Lastly, I think there is a real need for a discussion of how these principles can be systematically employed in the classroom, because despite the work of many Alexander teachers in this area (and their growing reach on the collegiate/conservatory level), their influence has yet to reach the tipping point either with elementary and secondary classroom instructors or administrators. I was hoping this might be that book, which it is not. Nonetheless, although this book is more focused on the teaching of particular skills, and particularly in one-on-one settings, all teachers should find this book provokes useful reflection on the means they employ. How it can be translated to group or classroom situations (if it can be) will need to be worked out.

Alexander teachers will have a distinct advantage in making use of Mr. Dimon's suggestions. At the very least, they too will find the book thought-provoking on important issues in pedagogy, even if they find themselves arguing with it as much as agreeing. In fact, one setting where the book might be put to good use is in an Alexander training course, where trainees can hone their thinking about it in group discussions. The book itself is attractively designed for portability and readability. The index and bibliography are assets, and the few photos illustrate well the points being made. I'm curious to hear fellow readers' opinions about the book, so please send me any feedback! ☺

From the Chair

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This study is fascinating to me for two reasons: one, because it shows how unconsciously and emotionally we react to different opinions (as Alexander said, nine times out of ten, when we think we're thinking we are not); and two, because it shows that the part of our brain that makes us feel good (relieved and rewarded) is active when we reject something contrary to our belief. Believing that we are right about something actually feels good.

So if we know we are right because we feel right when we think a certain way, and our brain unconsciously reinforces our beliefs by making us feel good when we feel right, how do we ever change our opinions? This study focused on politics but I imagine our brain works the same way for other opinions, both "physical" and "mental." In an Alexander Technique lesson I can use a mirror to see that I am standing straight when I feel like I am falling over; the mirror gives me evidence contrary to my feelings (my opinions) and if I am honest with myself I have to accept that evidence.

Where is the mirror for our minds? ☹

¹ Alexander, F.M. 1985. *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*. Centerline Press, p. 146 (italics in original).

² Carey, Benedict. 2006. "A Shocker: Partisan Thought Is Unconscious." *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/24/science/24find.html?_r=1.

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Alexander Technique International (ATI) is a worldwide organization of teachers, students, and friends of the Alexander Technique created to promote and advance the work begun by F. Matthias Alexander.

ATI embraces the diversity of the international Alexander community and works to promote international dialogue.

About the Alexander Technique

Experience of the Technique has led to praise from George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Prof. John Dewey, Sir Charles Sherrington, Julian Bream, John Cleese, Kevin Kline, Roald Dahl, Robertson Davies, and many others. It is taught at the Juilliard School of Performing Arts in New York, and the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival and the Shaw Festivals in Canada, Boston University, Brandeis University, and many other centers.

The common factor in all aspects of life is that how we are using ourselves—the way we do things—affects the result we get. The Alexander Technique is a means of improving that use. It has been called a “pre-technique” that people can apply to furthering their own special skills and activities. It is also essentially a preventive technique with which we can learn to improve and maintain our health.

The individual is the focus of the Alexander Technique. We are all unique, with different bodies, different experiences, and different problems. We go about the process of change in different ways and at different rates. For these reasons, what happens in an Alexander Technique lesson depends very much on the needs of the student at the time. In the basic sense, though, you will learn an attitude of not trying to gain your ends at any cost, and, at the same time, how to prevent your harmful habits that cause unnecessary stress and restrict your capabilities. Obviously, since what you are changing are patterns built up over many years, a permanent change will not be brought about overnight. However, the person who learns to stop and take time, to think constructively about how he or she uses him- or herself in everyday life, will find that this simple procedure can have far-reaching results.

Further information about the Alexander Technique can best be gained from a teacher near you (see the list at right for the nearest ATI office, or visit www.ati-net.com for teacher listings), as your changing experiences through lessons are the only real way to understand the nature of the work and what change is possible.



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