

# EXCHANGE

Volume 9, Number 2

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## Life Is Not an Emergency: The Alexander Technique and Stress

*Richard Brennan*  
*ATI Teaching Member, Ireland*

Do you suffer from backache, neckache, headaches or migraine, insomnia, breathlessness, worry, anxiety, fatigue, or just feel tense for much of the time? If so, you may well be suffering from stress without realizing it. As the pace of life increases, stress is affecting more and more people throughout the world.

Stress may be caused by overworking, looking after sick relatives, or simply having too much to do in too little time. It can affect us physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually.

Stress affects us physically by causing our whole system to be constantly on "red alert," aging us before our time. It can cause a variety of aches and pains and can even contribute to stress-related illnesses such as cancer, strokes, and heart problems, which can threaten life itself. It affects us mentally by causing mental blocks, poor concentration, or an overstimulation of our mind until eventually we have little or no control over persistent unwanted thoughts. It can cause anxiety, worry, or depression, which, in extreme cases, may permeate our whole existence until life is hardly worth living.

Stress can affect us emotionally, causing us to lose our temper over minor incidents and to react irrationally, which may damage relationships with our family or friends. It can even affect us spiritually, because it prevents us from being in contact with the peace and tranquillity that should be the very essence and foundation of our life—and worst of all, stress can cause us to lose our sense of humor.

At first, we may actively enjoy the buzz of the adrenaline as it rushes around

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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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## Editor's Page

*Andrea Matthews, editor*

One of my other “hats” is that of classical soprano, and recently I was invited to perform during the service at a local Unitarian Church. I received an unexpected bonus from the experience, namely, the theme of the minister Judith Mannheim’s sermon, which she entitled “Four Smooth Stones.” She took that title from a women’s group meeting, I believe, in which the leader of the meeting for that day had placed four stones, each inscribed with a brief command on the underside, in front of each participant. They all turned up each saying in turn, and discussed its significance. When the meeting was over, each person took home her stones as portable reminders to carry the insights on into her daily life. The stones read in turn: *Show Up*, *Pay Attention*, *Be & Speak Your Truth*, and *Let Go of Results*.

Rev. Mannheim related these thoughts to numerous issues of life, but as she pointed out, “We see things not as they are, but as *we* are.”\* Well, I am an Alexander teacher, and I saw a great Alexander lesson in that group of “directions.” As teachers, we need to “show up,” to be fully present and available, not just in our role as imparters of Alexandrian wisdom, but as whole persons. We need to pay attention, not to what we think “should” happen, but to what is actually happening, to the “conditions present” in the lesson,

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# EXCHANGE

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## From the Chair: Preaching to the Choir

Jamee Culbertson  
Chair, Alexander Technique International

*“It is only when people bring their differences together that we can weave a unique and beautiful world.” Anon.*

It's been brought to my attention lately that there remain people in the Alexander community, non ATI members *and* ATI members alike, who are still not clear about ATI's identity, who we are, and what we stand for. So, please forgive me if I appear to be “preaching to the choir,” writing about what many of you already know. For the sake of those of you who are not as familiar, please read on.

One of the main differences between ATI and all other organizations for the Alexander Technique worldwide is in the area of Certification processes for Teachers. All the other organizations are concerned to a major extent with the certification of “Training Courses,” where graduation from an “approved” training qualifies someone to become certified as a Teacher.

What ATI has in place is a Certification process that is based on the *qualita-*  
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## Alexander Technique International

For membership information, please contact Raewyn Haywood at the address below or by email at [membership@ati-net.com](mailto:membership@ati-net.com).

ATI membership: \$55 per year.  
Teaching membership: \$120 per year.  
Membership includes a subscription to Exchange. Subscription to Exchange alone, \$35 per year. Please send check or money order in US funds to:  
Alexander Technique International  
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## Life Is Not an Emergency

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our body when we take on an exciting new challenge, but long-term stress can rob us of everything that is important. It can take away our good health and replace it with a whole range of stress-related disorders until eventually we are unable to relax. There are many ways of reducing stress, but one of the safest, yet most effective ways is by learning the Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique is a method of self-awareness on many levels. It is very simple and can be understood by anyone, yet at the same time it is very profound. It is a way of improving balance, posture, and co-ordination; this in turn will help to release unconscious tension that many of us hold.

The human body is an amazing instrument, but most of us unconsciously interfere with its natural working, and this can lead to many health problems that could have been avoided. The release of muscular tension can dramatically help or prevent backache, arthritis, insomnia, as well as a whole range of other physical aches and pains that are so common in our society today. By learning to use this Technique you will become more aware of how you sit, stand, and move, and this will help you to reduce the strain placed upon the body. As these tensions are released, so are many of the thoughts that hold us back from being who we truly are. Many people also find that their confidence and self-esteem naturally grow, and with it a natural spontaneity, a greater contentment, and a deeper love of life.

The human body is an amazing instrument, but most of us unconsciously interfere with its natural working, and this can lead to many health problems that could have been avoided.

By releasing unwanted muscle tension, you will achieve a greater ease of movement, feel calmer, and gain a greater control over your own life. So, if you feel you are under continual pressure, for whatever reason, do yourself and your family a favor—get rid of stress before it gets rid of you!

*Ed.: This article is the first in a series (we hope!) intended to offer our members ideas and materials for promoting the Technique and their practices. Your suggestions and submissions are highly welcome. Articles for this series should be suitable for reprinting or adaptation by the membership. Permission is granted to the membership to reprint these articles, provided authors and the Exchange are credited. ☺*

## In Memoriam: Deborah Caplan

*Ralph Caplan*

*Ed.: When I received the pages containing this obituary and the eulogy which follows, they were ever so faintly redolent of a sweet perfume that Jane Kosminsky must have been wearing as she enclosed them in the envelope. My own experience of Debby Caplan was entirely indirect, through her image as the young blond girl in the pictures with F.M. Alexander, her reputation as teacher, and her writing. It struck me that for those of us who never met Debby Caplan, these brief pieces indeed can only bring what must be the faintest lingering perfume of what it was to know her—but that perfume is nonetheless sweet.*

Deborah Caplan, author, lecturer, and teacher of the Alexander Technique, died Sunday, October 8, 2000, at her home in New York City.

The daughter of the novelist and essayist Waldo Frank, Ms. Caplan was a dancer with the Pearl Primus and Jean Erdman companies while studying body control and movement with her mother Alma Frank and with F.M. Alexander, who originated the Alexander Technique and whose books popularized it. In 1956, with an MA from Hunter College and a master's degree in physical therapy from NYU, she joined the department of physical therapy at the Rusk Institute in New York. In 1964 she began a private practice specializing in back problems and teaching body use and movement to a great many dancers, musicians, and actors. She was a co-founder of the American Center for the Alexander Technique.

The author of numerous articles for medical journals and a book, *Back Trouble*, Ms. Caplan lectured widely at hospitals and universities and recently completed a videotape, *Solutions for Back Trouble*, with an introduction by William Hurt.

Her marriage in 1956 to Ralph Caplan ended in divorce. She is survived by her husband Lawrence King and two children, Aaron Caplan of San Francisco and Leah Caplan of New York. ☹

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**“Open new vistas, bring new insights, challenge our hypotheses,  
enrich our theory, expand our knowledge, and involve us more deeply  
in an understanding of the phenomena of human change.”**

**Carl Rogers**

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## Eulogy for Debby

*Jane Kosminsky*  
*Alexander Technique teacher, AmSat member*

When Leah [Caplan] asked me to speak, I thought, “I don’t know what to say! What words could ever describe or contain Debby Caplan?” Debby was color—cranberry reds, purples, lavender, and occasionally pale pink. Debby was movement—dancing, laughter, and the “incredible lightness of being.” Debby was an experience, an incomparable “up.”

Not that words eluded her. On the contrary, absolutely no one was more articulate about the Alexander Technique than Debby Caplan. Her prose was precise, unmistakable, and often playful. Who but Debby would think to say that “the waist, like the unicorn, is a mythical creature”?

My adventure with Debby began in 1982 when I became a trainee at ACAT. We were both dancers and we both loved to laugh; we had two great worlds in common. In class, she was formidable. She gave so much: the decisiveness of her hands, her wealth of experience, the example of her own superb “use,” and the clarity of her feedback. No one could describe what you weren’t doing quite so specifically as Debby. But she was always kind, never condescending. To me, she was quite perfect.

The first time I put hands on Debby, I was truly nervous. I brought so much intention to the effort that I practically threw her across the room; she was so, so light. And she was so, so generous. When we became teachers, newly minted and with tiny practices, so many of us got calls from Debby. She would say, “I just didn’t have time for this student. I hope you don’t mind, but I recommended you.”

Immediately after training, I assisted Debby in the training class at ACAT. It was a privilege to be there. Debby was incredibly gracious and kept deferring to me as though I had been teaching for years. She had such confidence in my burgeoning skills that I began to have confidence, too. One day we were called into the office. There had been a complaint about our class—we were laughing too much! Of course the second we heard that, we burst into laughter. It became an ongoing joke between us.

Debby was our Alexander rock, our great resource. Years after training, when we had difficulties with a student, we would still call Debby. Debby was the consummate problem solver. We continued to study with her. She was so, so clear. All this week, we have been confiding to each other: So much of what I do or don’t do, I learned from Debby. If I am clear at all, it’s because of Debby. I’m a better teacher because of Debby.

In 1997, a friend suggested that I produce a videotape about the Alexander Technique. Boom! For the next two years, I became an obsessed woman. I hadn't had so much fun since I stopped dancing, and, of course, Debby was a part of it. My videographers suggested that I make a second tape at the same time. Did I have an idea for one? Yes! I called Debby immediately. We

“This is perfect, that is perfect. When the perfect is taken from the perfect, only the perfect remains.”

*Sanskrit prayer*

could make a tape about Debby's exemplary work for people with back problems. At first she said yes, then she said no, she was too tired, too burnt out—“Let one of the younger teachers do it.” Finally, she let me persuade her.

She approached the project with her usual professionalism (she rehearsed like crazy), but I knew she was nervous about it. This is what was so extraordinary about Debby: she had great courage. No matter how anxious she became, on the day of the shoot, she was absolutely perfect. In fact, she was so extraordinary that the crew nicknamed her One-Take Caplan. I made mistakes, the director made mistakes, William Hurt made mistakes, but not Debby. And when she did have to repeat something (because of someone else's mistake), she was so close to the original that she made editing a breeze. It was an extraordinary accomplishment.

Debby was perfect and she has left us whole with a beautiful legacy to share with our friends, our families, our students. There is a Sanskrit prayer that has been helping me over the last few days. Translated, it says: “This is perfect, that is perfect. When the perfect is taken from the perfect, only the perfect remains.”

So now the question becomes, How can we move forward without her? How can we help each other to be without her? Thank God we are together, because together we can celebrate her. Debby is in our hearts and in our hands, our feelings, and our skills. To celebrate Debby, I plan to continue my ongoing journey with her. Please join me.☺

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“I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience.”

*Patrick Henry*

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## **ATI's 8<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting October 11–15, 2000**

*report by Richard Brennan (with an assist from Catherine Kettrick)*

An exciting event took place last October as around 70 Alexander teachers arrived in Ireland for ATI's 8th Annual General Meeting, which was held at the wonderful location of Spanish Point, County Clare. This was a milestone in the history of the organization, as it was the first meeting on European soil, and members of ATI and STAT alike enjoyed a remarkable week of inspiring workshops, thought-provoking talks, and hands-on sessions.

The conference, focusing on the transmission of wisdom across generations in the Alexander community, was entitled "Beyond Technique: The Experience of Learning, The Experience of Living." The "more feminine" influence of the Irish environment on the subject was felt in the conference, which included workshops and talks by a variety of speakers including Elisabeth Walker, Lucia Walker, Trish Hemmingway, Barbara Conable, and Marie-Françoise Le Foll.

People from Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Switzerland, UK, and USA descended upon Shannon Airport on the morning of October 11 and were whisked off to the venue of the conference, the Armada Hotel in the small village of Spanish Point. As the attendees arrived, the huge wild Atlantic waves broke over the rocks and sandy beach, which lay only a few yards from the hotel.

After Registration, those who had recovered from their jet-lag started the week with an afternoon trip to the spectacular Cliffs of Moher, which are the highest cliffs in Europe. Despite the strong winds, people immediately started talking to each other, sharing stories of the journey to the conference, both of their recent flight and their life.

At the first of many four-course suppers by candlelight, there was a warm welcome from Jamee Culbertson to all the members of ATI and other teachers who had come so far. The first day finished with a literally amazing talk from Trish Hemmingway entitled "Waiting at the Gate," on the role of Alexander teachers as they guide their pupils to new realms of experience.

Thursday, like every other day, started at 7:30 a.m. with either Chi Kung or T'ai Chi practice led by Jano Cohen, or an informal Alexander Technique exchange. Breakfast was followed by a short introduction to ATI with reports from the committees as well as visions for the future. This was followed by a special presentation by Elisabeth Walker, who gave a workshop as well as talking of her training with F.M. Alexander. Her workshop included "deep squats," "in and out of the chair," and the much-loved "hands on the back of the chair." There were plenty of questions and answers flowing throughout the demonstration.

Thursday afternoon continued with the choice of a discussion led by Catherine Kettrick, assisted by David Mills, on decision-making in ATI, which introduced Formal Consensus, or another exchange of hands-on work. This was followed by a fascinating anatomical slide presentation entitled “The Application of Body Mapping to Teaching the Alexander Technique,” given by Barbara Conable. This focused on the faulty maps that many people have of their bodies, which can give rise to faulty sensory appreciation.

To finish off the day there was a question and answer session with Elisabeth Walker and Buzz Gummere, who had trained with the Alexander brothers, which brought out some very interesting stories. Then many drifted off to the bar to chat about the day.

Friday brought the full moon in Aries and the ocean became calm and the sun shone at last through the blue sky. Everyone it seemed had settled in—including Jeremy Chance, who had now arrived minus his luggage! Both Friday and Saturday followed a similar pattern, with a choice among discussions, workshops, or hands-on exchange. The wonderful workshops included “Practicing Presence” with Lucia Walker, “Partnership Towards Equestrian Poise” with Robin Eastham, “Refurbishing Image-Making in Actors” with Cathy Madden, “The Face of Habit” with Tommy Thompson, “Learning Through Our Energy Systems” with Dale Beaver, “Creative Inhibition” with Marie-Françoise Le Foll, “The Writer Within” with Richard Brennan, “Thinking in the Space of the Body: Learning Beyond the Head-Heart Dichotomy” with David Mills, and “The Differences Between How Male and Female Musicians Learn the Alexander Technique” with Dr. Maribeth Hartwig Knaub.

Friday evening, amongst cheers and laughter, awards were handed out at supper for those who had helped ATI over the previous year, which was followed by a keynote address by Tommy Thompson entitled “Anam Cara” (soul friend). Indeed the whole feeling of the conference was a sense of achieving objectives as friends and having the support of other Alexander teachers rather than, as sadly is often the case, a sense of competition.

The last night was a culmination of a week of inspiration and creativity as the group Dordan (most of whom were familiar with the Technique) and Mairtin O’Connor played some heart-warming music for over two hours. These were some of the best traditional musicians in Ireland and it was nearly impossible for us to stay in our seats! The whole room became a sea of people dancing to their hearts’ content.

Sunday was a lazy day with another exchange session and an evaluation of the conference, with an overwhelming response to return again next year. As the participants left the hotel on Sunday afternoon, there was a unanimous

## AGM Report

feeling among all that “we arrived as strangers and departed as friends.” What better sign could have marked this extremely successful conference, which surpassed everyone’s expectations?

Alexander Technique International’s 9<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting in October 2001 will also be held at Spanish Point and all are welcome. A brochure will be mailed to ATI members later this spring. Please contact Alexander Technique International Inc., 1692 Massachusetts Ave., 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138 USA for more details. ☺

### **A Letter to the Membership from the AGM Site Committee**

*Jim Froelich*  
Co-Chair, AGM Site Committee

Dear ATI members,

The striking success of the 2000 ATI conference in Ireland presents some new challenges to the Site Committee. We want to build on the strong attendance and international flavor of that meeting. We are also committed to finding conference sites several years ahead of the event, as agreed at the 1998 Plymouth Massachusetts conference. We found this necessary for many reasons: we have experienced huge pressure when we organize a site in less than a year; making plans for presenters and content is much easier if the next year’s site is known during a conference; and suitable places become very difficult to find on shorter notice (some in the U.S. are reserved two to three years in advance).

A cancellation by a host last summer led to the brilliant possibility to return to the Armada Hotel in Ireland in 2001, which is now reserved for Sunday October 21-Thursday Oct 25. The Armada Hotel can be contacted at the website [www.iol.ie/~armada/hotel.html](http://www.iol.ie/~armada/hotel.html), by email at [armada@iol.ie](mailto:armada@iol.ie), or by phone at +353 65 70 84110. At this writing we are planning for a site near Baltimore in the eastern U.S. for the 2002 conference. (This site is 20 minutes from Baltimore Washington International Airport, not Dulles, as was stated in the Communiqué.)

With any choice we are attempting to balance many demands: an amenable space of appropriate size in a comfortable setting, with good food, accessible

*Ireland update from Richard Brennan:  
As to the “foot and mouth” scare—  
Life goes on as normal. At present  
there is only one case of foot and  
mouth in Ireland which is in the far  
north over 200 miles away from  
Spanish Point—all animals in the  
area have been killed as a safety  
measure. All food is fine and extra  
precautions are being taken to stop the  
spread happening elsewhere—so there  
will be no danger to people at the  
AGM.*

*Ed: We will be sure to keep you posted  
if there are any new developments.*

## The Conscious Ear: The Tomatis Method

*Douwe Visser  
ATI Teaching Member, New Zealand*

According to the foreword in Dr Tomatis' biography, *The Conscious Ear*: "The work of Alfred A. Tomatis, the French physician, psychologist, and educator, has had a revolutionary impact on our understanding of the ear. He has opened the way to a transformation of human listening and a breakthrough in the improvement of learning, language, music, creativity, and self esteem. He addresses some of the most difficult therapeutic/educational problems now facing us, such as stuttering, autism, dyslexia, motivation, balance, and motor control integration and shows how they are affected and controlled by the ear."

Tomatis and others found that the performance of the ear, as can be measured by audiometric tests, is not a fixed quantity, but depends on the subject's state of mind or even the personality of the test administrator.

Because his father was a well-known singer in France, Tomatis worked a lot with singers and discovered some revolutionary facts about our voice. For example, at the time, it was commonly thought that the type of voice like bass, baritone, or tenor for men was determined by the size of the larynx. A

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## Letter from Site Committee

*Continued from previous page*

to as many members as possible (and specifically within an hour's drive of an international airport), and at reasonable cost. But though we want to plan ahead, we don't want to lose contact with the wishes of our members. This is your organization! The best meeting site suggestions often come from outside the committee. Please help us by letting us know where you would like to meet in future years, and suggesting actual sites where ATI could hold a conference. Accessible meeting sites in Europe are a high priority for which we as yet have little information. We want to serve members worldwide; meetings in Hungary, New Zealand, and Japan are future possibilities.

Please contact the Site Committee with your suggestions. Email sent to [agm-site@ati-net.com](mailto:agm-site@ati-net.com) will reach both Site Co-Chairs, Jim Froelich in Ohio, U.S.A., and Graham Elliott in the U.K. Please consider being active in researching local sites; we have helpful guidelines for criteria for meeting sites. And please consider joining the Site Committee for this purpose or for general help— you will be quite welcome! ☺

## The Conscious Ear

tenor was supposed to have a smaller one than a bass singer. Tomatis found no significant relationship between vocal pitch and the size of the voice box. There was however a connection between vocal pitch and certain qualities of the ear, so much so that Tomatis coined the phrase that one sings with one's ear, and what the ear can't hear, the voice can't produce.

He experimented with this by fitting a singer with headphones and letting him sing into a microphone and through an amplifier connected to the singer's headphones. Electronically Tomatis was able to create certain "gaps" in the frequency spectrum of the amplifier, so that the singer could not hear certain frequencies as clearly as the rest. By changing the pitch of those "gaps," he could make the singer's voice sound more sonorous, more nasal, clearer, or warmer in tone.

When we sing or speak, the sound that we produce not only comes into our ears from the vibrations of the air, but also from inside, through the vibrations of our bones. It is interesting to experiment with this by putting earmuffs on and starting to hum or sing. The voice sounds quite different with the ears covered up, because all the sound comes through the bones.

As mentioned above, Tomatis often used a headphone-amplifier combination with the people he treated. He developed a special amplifier in which he could change the way his clients perceived their own or a recorded voice or music. He called this instrument the "Electronic Ear" and took several patents out on it.

He also discovered that our ear adapts to the language environment we grow up in. That means the ear becomes most sensitive to certain pitch or frequency ranges that are dominant in that language. With his Electronic Ear he was able to adapt, for example, an English speaker's ear to what the French ear hears and made it in that way considerably easier for an English speaker to learn French without the English accent. He noted that Slavic languages apparently have the widest band of frequencies and therefore the Slavs can learn to speak foreign languages quite well.

In order to make or speak certain sounds, the ear has to be able to hear them first and that is what most of his training was about, to expand the frequency range of one's ear. The sounds used are designed to reproduce the main stages of development of the ear, starting well before birth and continuing until the time we learn to read and write. This sound stimulation program starts with a **passive phase** in which the ear is stimulated by means of filtered sounds; "passive" means here that the client does not have to play an active part in the program. The program then progresses to an **active phase** of voice exercises, to develop and improve listening.

The passive sound stimulation phase aims to recreate the prenatal environment in the womb. It consists of electronically modified sounds rich in high frequencies, and is usually made up of a combination of mother's filtered, recorded voice and music by Mozart. The mother's voice is used for children and adolescents, seldom for adults. As Paul Madaule writes in his book, *When Listening Comes Alive*: "Children's reaction to their mother's voice can be extraordinary to watch, especially for the parents. The children become more affectionate. Those who tended to be distant take to their mother's lap, and start kissing, hugging and embracing her. What a delight for a mother of an autistic child!"

The active sound stimulation program involves exercises. First there are singing and chanting exercises and then speech. All the sounds are fed back to the ear via headphones and are modified through the Electronic Ear. Then the client is subjected to sounds rich in high frequencies such as *s, f, ch,* and *j*. As Madaule describes it: "The body posture, respiration and sound production techniques learned during the chanting exercises still apply, and the sounds are clearly articulated with the lips projected forward."

It is also interesting to note that Tomatis found a marked difference in voice quality when controlled with the right versus the left ear; right ear dominance produced a much better quality. Tomatis called this the "leading ear" because it was superior for the control of the singing voice, instrument playing, and speech production.

I can certainly recommend the earlier-mentioned book by Paul Madaule because it also contains a lot of exercises in what he calls "Earobics," to improve our listening and voice production. One of the most effective exercises in this regard, he claims, is to read out loud, and let the words flow off your lips effortlessly into the supposed audience and with an unrestricted larynx (and free neck). He recommends the exercise for children as well, in order for them to feel more energetic and more confident.

## References

Madaule, Paul. 1994. *When Listening Comes Alive*. Moulin Publishing. ISBN 0-9697079-1-6.

Tomatis, Alfred A. 1991. *The Conscious Ear*. Station Hill Press. ISBN 0-88268-108-7. ☺

## Eschewing Obfuscation

*Karen Guertler*

*ATI Teaching Member, Maryland, USA*

“It hurts,” “the head aches,” “the shoulder cracks.” I hear these expressions from many, probably most, of my Alexander Technique students as they describe their bodily sensations. But whose head hurts? Whose shoulder cracks? It’s not just our students: during a recent exam, my doctor asked me to lower the chin, and I resisted the temptation to reach over to lower the other chin in the room.

Such word choices suggest that most of us carry our “selves” around in a body but don’t truly inhabit those bodies. When we become more conscious of how we express ourselves, we can observe the subtle and no-so-subtle effects that our vocabularies have on our appreciation of ourselves, our beliefs, and how we interpret our experiences.

Our language use affects and reflects our perceptions and movement, so if we speak of “the body,” we cannot truly live in it, nor experience our whole, integrated selves to the fullest. Even saying “my body” implies a separation. One student got around this dilemma creatively by referring to “the shoulder part of me.”

Even a small change can affect awareness and release: a “ribcage” traps organs and limits movement, but “ribs” protect tissues and expand with breathing.

Generally, students try hard to please a teacher, yet trying suggests effort and the possibility of failure. Similarly, students may expect to work on changes or discoveries made in a lesson, perhaps viewing their ongoing explorations as yet another item to cram onto their “to-do” lists, but

Our language use affects and reflects our perceptions and movement, so if we speak of “the body,” we cannot truly live in it, nor experience our whole, integrated selves to the fullest.

they will progress more easily if instead they are directed to experiment with uncovering possibilities. When we clearly articulate the process as one of allowing changes to occur rather than expecting specific results, we foster an atmosphere of increased willingness for open-ended exploration, tolerance for missteps, and less physical resistance, thus enhancing transformation. We know this, of course, but because learning the Alexander Technique is so different from studying most other disciplines, the pupil may need frequent reminding. We facilitate or limit the process by how we express our intent.

As an Alexander Technique teacher, I strive for clarity when working with (not on) a student, with my vocabulary as well as my hands, stressing the

collaborative aspect. The shift from “on” to “with” further illustrates the influence of minor word substitutions.

Language reveals and influences not only our movement but also our emotions. We can connect to or distance ourselves from others or aspects of ourselves through words. “You get so frustrated when...” is a common lament, but what is the speaker saying? Doesn’t she really mean “I get so frustrated...?” The vague, generic you gets overworked, the speaker absolves herself of ownership of and responsibility for her feelings and reactions, and her meaning clouds. We may be asked, “How does that make you feel,” as though outside forces are acting on us independently of our own inner resources. Similarly, one may state that something or someone “made me feel” a certain way. The more useful question is “How do you feel?” and the more accurate statement is “I feel...” Our feelings are our feelings, part of our thinking and moving and knowing and being our whole selves. Until we recognize and claim ownership of our emotions we will continue to react to others habitually rather than inhibiting long enough to respond with conscious choice. Using language in a more conscious, less habitual way expedites the process of identifying all kinds of habits and monitoring progress.

*“I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...” Horton the Elephant<sup>1</sup>*

We’ve probably all had the experience of making what we thought is a perfectly clear explanation to five people, four of whom comprehend perfectly, and the fifth is 180 degrees off. A student once told me, “I’m a writer, and I use a word to mean something very specific.” The problem is that different people may attach specific, but different, meanings to the same word.

*“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”*

*“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”*

*“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be the master, that’s all.”<sup>2</sup>*

Giving students the opportunity to express themselves in several different ways may be necessary, and providing feedback in our own words (as in, “What I hear you saying is...”) can help ensure clarity, reassure the pupil that

*Continued on page 22*

## 'Voice' as Person

*Cornelius L. Reid*

*reprinted by permission from Voice: Psyche and Soma, 1975, Joseph Patelson Music House, pp. 13-16*

Any program designed to promote organic movement when such movement has been held in check will constitute a threat and arouse anxiety. The direct purpose of functional vocal training is to provoke such movements and, through the mechanics of registration, bring about fundamental changes within the coordinative process giving rise to 'voice.' The result is to upset both the physical and emotional equilibrium to which the student has become accustomed and which he has learned to accept as legitimate part of the self. Participation in a program designed to bring about dynamic changes of this description is bound to undermine one's security, raising, as it does, one of the most agonizing of all questions, 'Who am I?' and 'Is the "I" I think myself to be truly me?' It is seeking the answer to this question which makes genuine vocal growth so challenging.

By viewing 'voice' as an extension of the person, it becomes apparent that 'growing up' vocally can be just as trying an experience as growing up physically and emotionally. Indeed, undergoing vocal training based upon functional needs is very much like passing through adolescence. There is the same feeling of being in limbo, of an absence of self-identification. This is the risk factor in emotional growth, and it is the risk factor in vocal growth. This being so, training procedures designed to improve function touch upon a very sensitive area, as correction of a vocal problem is equivalent to an attack on the student's emotional core.

By viewing 'voice' as an extension of the person, it becomes apparent that 'growing up' vocally can be just as trying an experience as growing up physically and emotionally.

Under these circumstances singing becomes a far more complicated procedure than one might have at first supposed. Restricted to purely physical dimensions there are but two factors to be considered, registration and resonance. But neither of these operates in a vacuum and must be considered part of the total person, with allowance made for judgments and attitudes toward creative goals, aesthetic concepts and ideals, physical potential, and emotional blockages. It is the latter which may now be seen to hamper progress so severely. Chronic muscular contraction within the respiratory tract brought on by anxiety arrests free movement, and this condition seriously impairs the muscular adjustments governing registration, as well as the action of the suspensory muscles which position the larynx. Vocal training, therefore, while directly concerned with registration and adjustments for resonance, must, through them, also break down tensions brought on by organic contraction due to anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

*Ed: For more information on the issues involved in singing and teaching singers, such as registration (the reflex responses of the vocal mechanism producing what are known as "head" and "chest" voice), I highly recommend the rest of this book (Voice: Psyche and Soma), as well as Bel Canto: Principles and Practices (1950) and The Free Voice: A Guide to Natural Singing (1965), all published by Joseph Patelson Music House, NY, NY USA, along with Reid's masterful reference work, A Dictionary of Vocal Terminology, 1995, Recital Publications.*

Solving vocal problems by applying techniques which encourage natural movement and cause interfering muscles to relinquish their hold can be painful. To feel free movement within a muscular system which over the years has to some extent been bound arouses the very fears, real or imagined, from which all of us spend so much time and energy trying to hide: fear of being exposed and vulnerable, fear of the unknown, fear of losing control, fear of the sensual pleasure aroused as a consequence of organic expansion, and, sometimes, fear of succeeding. Overcoming fears of this kind is essential to progress for they must be overcome if expansive movement is to replace the confining tensions to which the singer has become habituated. Expansive movement is anxiety provoking, but going with such movement is unavoidable if the student is to progress.

One of the disappointments of functional training is that many who study are incapable of crossing this Rubicon. A surprising number are hampered by a limited freedom tolerance and it is impossible to nudge them beyond a certain point, each move toward functional freedom being resolutely countered by a new kind of blockage. The ingenuity with which this is accomplished is often quite startling, especially since the student's professed aim is to improve. One part of his nature may desire to get free, but physically, at the crucial moment, his anxiety will get the better of him. *Especially for the extremely talented, inner tensions are the single greatest obstacle to vocal development.*

The consequence of one's emotional constitution on phonation cannot be overestimated. Indeed, singing, or learning to sing, would seem to be impossible unless one is free of psychological tensions. Fortunately, such is not the case. Many highly neurotic individuals sing beautifully, just as many emotionally stable individuals cannot sing at all. In the first instance the singer has learned to make his neurosis work for him. Sublimation must be considered within this context, but more important perhaps is an inner longing for contact with others, as the desire to 'reach out' is, in a very real sense, a precursor of expansive movement. Furthermore, muscular armoring, which commonly centers in the throat, does not always center in that area, but will often lodge in the pelvic region, the abdomen, or the diaphragm. When psychic tensions have not invaded the laryngeal area, singing as an aggressive act can have a certain freedom and drive since, under these circumstances, the laryngeal muscles would be able to operate at a high level of efficiency. As for those who are emotionally stable, it is possible to be free of inner tensions without necessarily being an athlete, and the singer is a vocal athlete.

If one's characterological structure seems to make the training program more complicated, it does. Surely it is difficult enough to obtain volitional control over involuntary muscles when there are no psychological problems with which to contend without having to deal with emotional tenseness as well.

## 'Voice' as Person

To a remarkable degree, however, normal work on register development and adjustments for resonance will go a long way toward restoring lost motility, regardless of its origin. By stimulating movement within the laryngeal pharynx and relieving throat constriction, other tensions throughout the respiratory tract will 'let go,' not always, of course, but often enough for efforts made in that direction to be justified. For the student who pursues this course there are two possible advantages: he will have learned how to sing correctly, and he will have grown into a deeper knowledge of himself as a person.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>For a more extended treatment of psychic tensions and their effect upon the voice, see: *The Voice of Neurosis*, by Paul L. Moses, New York: Grune and Stratton, 1954. ☺

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## Heard Over the Internet

*Anonymous*

On the first day of school our professor introduced himself and challenged us to get to know someone we didn't already know.

I stood up to look around, when a gentle hand touched my shoulder. I turned around to find a wrinkled little old lady beaming up at me with a smile that lit up her entire being. She said, "Hi handsome. My name is Rose. I'm eighty-seven years old. Can I give you a hug?"

I laughed and enthusiastically responded, "Of course you may!" and she gave me a giant squeeze.

"Why are you in college at such a young, innocent age?" I asked. She jokingly replied, "I'm here to meet a rich husband, get married, have a couple of children, and then retire and travel."

"No, seriously," I asked. I was curious what might have motivated her to be taking on this challenge at her age.

“I always dreamed of having a college education and now I’m getting it.”

After class we walked to the student union building and shared a chocolate milkshake. We became instant friends. Every day for the next three months we would leave class together and talk nonstop. I was always mesmerized listening to this “time machine” as she shared her wisdom and experience with me.

Over the course of the year, Rose became a campus icon and she easily made friends wherever she went. She loved to dress up and she reveled in the attention bestowed upon her by the other students. She was living it up.

At the end of the semester we invited Rose to speak at our football banquet. I’ll never forget what she taught us. She was introduced and stepped up to the podium. As she began to deliver her prepared speech, she dropped her three-by-five cards on the floor. Frustrated and a little embarrassed she leaned into the microphone and simply said “I’m sorry I’m so jittery. I gave up beer for Lent and this whiskey is killing me! I’ll never get my speech back in order so let me just tell you what I know.” As we laughed she cleared her throat and began:

“We do not stop playing because we are old; we grow old because we stop playing. There are only four secrets to staying young, being happy, and achieving success.

“You have to laugh and find humor everyday. You’ve got to have a dream. When you lose your dreams, you die. We have so many people walking around who are dead and don’t even know it!

“There is a huge difference between growing older and growing up. If you are nineteen years old and lie in bed for one full year and don’t do one productive thing, you will turn twenty years old. If I am eighty-seven years old and stay in bed for a year and never do anything I will turn eighty-eight. Anybody can grow older. That doesn’t take any talent or ability. The idea is to grow up by always finding the opportunity in change.

“Have no regrets. The elderly usually don’t have regrets for what we did, but rather for things we did not do. The only people who fear death are those with regrets.”

She concluded her speech by courageously singing “The Rose.” She challenged each of us to study the lyrics and live them out in our daily lives.

At the year’s end Rose finished the college degree she had begun all those years ago. One week after graduation Rose died peacefully in her sleep. Over two thousand college students attended her funeral in tribute to the wonderful woman who taught by example that it’s never too late to be all you can possibly be. ☹

## Book Reviews

### **I Don't Have to Make Everything All Better**

*by Gary & Joy Lundberg*

Viking Books, New York, 1999, ISBN 0-670-88485-5. Hardcover, 272 pp., \$21.95

### **How to Be a Help Instead of a Nuisance**

#### **Practical Approaches to Giving Support, Service & Encouragement to Others**

*by Karen Kissel Wegela*

Shambala Books, Boston, 1996, ISBN 1-57062-150-0. Paperback, 239 pp., \$13.00

*reviewed by Andrea Matthews*

How could the curiosity of an Alexander teacher or teacher-to-be not be piqued by such titles? This question of helping was very much with me when I started in my training and I continue to meet it daily. How can we help without interfering? As teachers we aim to offer the most meaningful kind of help, helping our students learn how to help themselves and even others. Often our students come to us, desperate to be helped (or rather “fixed”), and we must find a way to lead them back, compassionately, to their own resources and responsibility. At the same time, we must avoid the temptation of trying to do for them what only they can do for themselves.

Moreover, we are all friends, spouses, parents, siblings, or co-workers as well, in relationships that are more or less challenging in similar ways. So, while these two books are not directly “Alexandrian,” I’ll be looking at them from the point of view of how they might contribute to our work and lives.

F.M. Alexander used to remark on human beings’ tendency to complicate everything. One way we do this is by taking responsibility for others’ business; another is by passing off responsibility for our own to others. It is all too easy to get caught in that snare in our own teaching; we want to help, and our students want to be helped. In their book *I Don't Have to Make Everything All Better*, Gary and Joy Lundberg present straightforward and accessible tools for clarifying responsibility and offering real and effective support to others. Resisting any temptation to “complexify” their message, they’ve distilled the experience of years in professional counseling and in raising their own children into six simple, but challenging (as simple things often are) principles:

1. Be an effective validator, by listening with your full attention, especially to the details, feelings and needs being expressed, without judging or offering “solutions.” They define validation as “the ability to walk emotionally with another person without trying to change his or her thinking or direction” and see it as answering the universal human need “to know that I am of worth, my feelings matter, and someone really cares about me.” What makes it possible to validate another person is the acceptance that one can offer help, but one doesn’t have the power to make anything “all better.”
2. Leave responsibility where it belongs, with the person who has the problem. (I would point out that responsibility doesn’t equate with blame, as many people seem to feel.) Effective boundary setting depends on being kind, gentle, respectful, and firm.

3. Acknowledge emotions (not rushing past them or denying their validity).
4. Develop the art of listening.
5. Find the right time to teach (not in the heat of the moment, but when you are both calm).
6. Learn effective validating phrases and questions (specifically ones that encourage further expression, and avoiding “why” questions and judgmental remarks).

The Lundbergs accompany these principles with clear explanations and examples of their application in various kinds of relationships, fleshing out the bare bones I’ve given above.

As I read these principles, I thought often of my training with Tommy Thompson: how often he stresses that the teachable moment can only arise when the person feels “met”—where he is and as he is, without judgment. That teaching is listening. That teaching is following the person where he goes, while keeping one’s own balance and commitment to support. That teaching is about giving a person’s experience back to him, so he can make his own choices. That teaching is providing support and trusting the person to come to awareness of his choices. A basically simple, but not simplistic book, *I Don’t Have to Make Everything All Better* applies what we would call the principle of inhibition to relationships in a form that can be picked up, assimilated, and put to work in short order.

The second book, *How to Be a Help Instead of a Nuisance*, is a somewhat weightier, but no less practical book. Ms. Wegela writes from the perspective of contemplative psychotherapy, which arises from the mindfulness practices of Chögyam Trungpa and Tibetan Buddhism. The path of growth it maps begins with work with oneself (“living the work”), especially through sitting meditation, to develop clarity, compassion, and balance; then with relationships both in listening and offering feedback; and finally finding the skill and balance to engage in more active helping both on one’s own and as part of a team of helpers. It offers not a laundry list of dos and don’ts and symptoms and “cures,” but the plain wisdom of sowing and growing and reaping. It takes more time to read and process such a book, but it has its rewards. For those who find the literature of Zen and Buddhist meditative experience helpful in assimilating their experiences in the Alexander Technique (as I do), this elegantly written book can help with the transition from insight to practice. ☺

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## **Alexander Technique on the Net**

Robert Rickover is creating a new website, [KidsPosture.com](http://KidsPosture.com), devoted to practical methods parents and educators can use to help kids improve their posture. If you have any suggestions or would like to contribute to this project, please contact Robert. Email: [robert@alexandertechnique.com](mailto:robert@alexandertechnique.com). Phone: 402-465-4433 Mail: 2434 Ryons St., Lincoln, Nebraska, USA 68502

New items are always appearing on ATI’s web site at [www.ati-net.com](http://www.ati-net.com). Also, at [www.alexandertechnique.com/online](http://www.alexandertechnique.com/online), you’ll find links to the rapidly growing number of Alexander Technique resources on the Internet. Alexander teacher listings can be found both on the ATI website and on the “Ask Dr. Weil” website at [www.drweil.com](http://www.drweil.com).

Send an empty email to [ATI-Interchange-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:ATI-Interchange-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) to join ATI’s internet mail group, Interchange. The new list has lots of great features, like common file storage and a chat room. To access these features you need to join egroups. Log into <http://www.yahoogroups.com/> and join up!

You can send mail to the ATI Board as a group at [board@ati-net.com](mailto:board@ati-net.com), or to individual board members at: [chair@ati-net.com](mailto:chair@ati-net.com), [assistantchair@ati-net.com](mailto:assistantchair@ati-net.com), [treasurer@ati-net.com](mailto:treasurer@ati-net.com), [execsec@ati-net.com](mailto:execsec@ati-net.com), or [correspondsec@ati-net.com](mailto:correspondsec@ati-net.com).

If you launch your own website, or find anything Alexander-related on the Web, let us know at: [newsletter@ati-net.com](mailto:newsletter@ati-net.com)! ☺

## Eschewing Obfuscation

*Continued from page 15*

the message sent was the message received, and help us to understand their perspective.

Further complicating the picture, each of us filters messages through our own perceptions, our own experiences and expectations (as in parents or spouses who “already know what s/he was going to say” or “should know what s/he wanted”), so that frequently the message gets scrambled in the receiving. Again, active listening and giving and asking for clarification can minimize misunderstandings.

We also convey meaning through our nonverbal signals, and while they may be more honest because they are less consciously controlled (except in the Alexander community!), their meaning may be even more individual than our use of words and therefore even more easily misread.

If we are not in our bodies or claiming our feelings, then where or who are we?

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Seuss, 1940, *Horton Hatches the Egg*. As cited in: *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed. 1992. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

<sup>2</sup>Lewis Carroll, 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. As cited in: *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed. 1992. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. ☺

## An ATI Wish List

Wishes really do get answered! We're pleased to report that Rebecca Lisak has volunteered to be our new Communications Committee Chair.

We are also pleased to announce that we have new Co-Chairs for the Nominations Committee: Kathy Sarra and Kay Hooper. We encourage the involvement of our members, especially non-USA members, in this committee so that we can increase our international representation. Contact [nominations@ati-net.com](mailto:nominations@ati-net.com).

The Interchange eGroups forum is in need of a Moderator. Basic computer knowledge is needed. For information, contact: Raewyn Haywood, ATI Administrative Assistant, at: [alexandertechnique@compuserve.com](mailto:alexandertechnique@compuserve.com).

ATI has a new phone system that needs some simple programming and occasional maintenance, which can be done by phone from anywhere in the USA. For information, contact our new Communications Chair, Rebecca Lisak at [communications@ati-net.com](mailto:communications@ati-net.com).

Members interested in working with Graham Elliott on a new “Languages Committee” are invited to contact him at [gje@ntlworld.com](mailto:gje@ntlworld.com).

Volunteers in the Boston area are always needed to help our Administrative Assistant with ATI's many mailings, etc. (Mailing materials could also be transmitted electronically, printed, and mailed from any US locale. ATI would cover the expenses.) For information, contact Raewyn Haywood at [membership@ati-net.com](mailto:membership@ati-net.com) or 1-888-668-8996.

And the ExchangeE is always eager for your input! We would like to include line drawings in upcoming issues, too. If you're feeling literary or artistic, send your creations along. For submission information, see page 2. ☺

## Editor's Page

*Continued from page 2*

in the student, and in the student's response to what we are offering. To "be and speak our truth," we need to embody and express what is true for us, from the principles of the work to their wider implications about being in the world. Finally, we need to let go of results, attending to means and allowing ends to be carried out, and not subtly (or not so subtly) pressuring our students to meet some agenda of ours for their progress. We need to attend to these "directions," because they are precisely what we are asking our students to risk attending to. For curiously enough, they do involve risk, a risk we can only fully appreciate through our own experience.

"It isn't what we don't know that is the problem, but what we know for sure that just ain't so," someone once said, and it is in showing up, paying attention, being and speaking our truth, and letting go of results—in other words, being fully present—that we pose the greatest challenge to "what we know for sure." In being present this way, we open ourselves to what Alan Watts termed "the wisdom of insecurity." Rather than looking for a "better" set of habits, we continue to receive the conditions present, and respond in the moment, without clinging to a particular outcome, without avoiding any message experience may hold for us, deriving the support we need not from bracing ourselves, but from continually opening ourselves to what is.

"It isn't what we don't know that is the problem, but what we know for sure that just ain't so."

As Alexander himself pointed out, this endeavor is on the cutting edge of evolution: it represents a new function of consciousness appearing in the world. Right now it represents a direction, rather than a state to be

achieved. It is a work in progress in each of us and in humanity as a whole. There is a story of a Zen master who was asked by a student, "Master, how is it that you are able to be always present and conscious?" The master replied, "Ah, but I'm not. I just come back before you notice!" So while we need not expect ourselves to outdo a Zen master, it is to the extent that we are able to embody these directions (and honestly admit to ourselves—and to our students, if necessary—when we are not) that we are able to provide a safe, believable, and supportive learning space for our students. When we are conscious, receiving, congruent in being and speech, and free of assumptions and expectations, that we most encourage our students to take the risk of being more themselves, which in the end is what they have shown up for.

\*For the curious: Rev. Mannheim attributed this insight to Anaïs Nin, but I saw it again only days later, attributed to the Talmud. Hmm. ☺

## Weight and Relaxation at the Piano

*Kay S. Hooper*

*piano teacher, ATI Teaching Member, Pennsylvania, USA, & Co-Chair, Nominations Committee  
reprinted by permission from "The Technique Post Box," Keyboard Companion, Spring 1992*

*What do you teach your students about weight and relaxation?*

Relaxation is a word I avoid in my teaching. It simply has too little specific meaning to be of much use. Students may suppose that it is a general feeling of well-being, or the absence of "tension." But how does a student know how or when such a vague state is achieved?

In reality, a body which is totally "relaxed" is little more than a pile of bones surrounded by gelatinous muscle tissue. It is unable to support its own weight, let alone move in a series of complicated patterns.

The playing mechanism depends greatly upon muscle pairs working in opposition; one contracts as the other expands. This partnership allows the arm and fingers to bend, for example. While contraction should not be associated with tension, neither should expansion be conceived of as relaxation. They are simply muscles working in balanced opposition to allow the body to function fluidly.

A more realistic goal than "relaxation" is *ease of use*. Allowing the body to work harmoniously, efficiently, and freely will produce a state of general well-being, and there are specific directions for achieving this ease. These directions have become the core of what is known as the "Alexander Technique."

F.M. Alexander (1869-1955) devised a brief but very specific set of directions for efficient "use of the self," a phrase referring to habitual movement patterns. These directions, conceived after nine years of detailed study of his own movement patterns, can be universally applied because they are based on skeletal construction.

Alexander found that most difficulties (or "tensions") result from skeletal imbalance, ultimately resulting in downward pressure on the spine. One of the imbalances easiest to see in pianists is the tendency to lean consistently to one side while playing. This can result in one raised shoulder and an exaggerated sideways curve in the spine, both of which decrease the effective length of the spine.

At this point the matter of "weight" comes into play, for skeletal imbalance results in an uneven distribution of body weight. In the case of the leaning pianist, the weight of the torso is no longer balanced, nor is it properly supported by the back. This body weight is shifted toward the arm on the lowered side. Now, this arm must not only move and play, it must also hold up the weight of the torso—hence the increased "tension" in that arm.

Another common example of imbalance is the tendency to draw both shoulders upward, especially in difficult passages. This response is similar to the body's natural fear response and may be a warning sign that the performer is not confident. As the shoulders draw up, they also draw in toward the spine, narrowing the upper back and often tensing the neck. Again, these movements put downward pressure on the spine and restrict free movement of the arms.

Alexander also discovered that the weight of the head, when put into imbalance, exerted great downward pressure on the spine. This is obvious in a young pianist who, in an effort to read music from the music rack, throws the chin forward and up. Unfortunately, this movement throws the weight of the head backward and down, with considerable downward pressure on the spine and, possibly, excess curvature.

Applying the concepts of the Alexander Technique is done in three ways—awareness, inhibition, and direction. Awareness involves asking a most important question—*what am I doing?* The depth of the answer will depend on experience with the technique and sensitivity to subtle changes. But even small children can sense changes in balance and find a challenge in this detective work. Exaggerating a movement can often clarify any existing imbalance.

Inhibition is related to another question—*do I want to do what I am doing?* If the answer is no, inhibition tells the body to stop doing it. Inhibition of undesired movements can occur during performance. However, young students often succeed best at this step by actually stopping the playing, rebalancing, and beginning again.

This leads to the final step—direction. Direction answers the question—*what do I want to do?* The answer to this question becomes the direction the student gives him/herself, beginning with the primary control and adding further directions when possible. Directions are best begun with the word, “allow,” avoiding any terminology connected to force.

Together, these three elements become an ongoing process of gentle re-education of the body. I refer to them as a student’s *aide*, not only in the lesson but in practice and performance as well. The re-education process is both mental and physical, with the goals of clarity of intention, ease of execution, and improved stamina.

Working with the Alexander Technique is best done after study with a certified Alexander teacher, ideally in an extended workshop session. Books and articles should whet the appetite for such study, but they cannot adequately express the physical sensations of body balance. This said, I include a few of my favorite titles, in the hope of whetting some appetites.

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# Understanding a Therapeutic Experience in an Alexander Technique Class, Part I

*Andrea Matthews*

*ATI Teaching Member & editor, Exchange*

*“Talk about a man’s individuality and character: it’s the way he uses himself.” F.M. Alexander*

*“...every single thing we are doing in the work is exactly what is being done in Nature where the conditions are right, the difference being that we are learning to do it consciously.” F.M. Alexander*

*A man asked a Zen master, “What is it that you do that makes you so special?” The master replied, “I eat, I sleep.” The man exclaimed, “But I do that!” “Ah,” replied the master, “but I know I’m doing them.”*

## My Therapeutic Experience

Before I trained as a teacher myself, I used to attend a small, weekly Alexander Technique group class (with Mio Morales) in the early 1990s while I was still living in New York City. Often in this class, along with other activities, we would each pick an activity of interest to us (or an activity “with issues” for us) to explore with the teacher, with the rest of the class observing. This ranged from sitting and standing to lifting something to drumming to dancing, depending on the day and the student. I had already used reading aloud as my activity in past classes, and on this occasion I chose that again. What led up to the moment “something happened” is not quite as clear in my memory as the moment itself, and the moments after also tend to fade out, but as I was reading, the teacher was in various indirect ways drawing my attention to how I was literally “getting into” the reading and losing (from my field of awareness) the rest of myself, the room, and the others in the room, and that that was affecting my coordination, the sound of my voice, and my impact on my listeners. I must note that I was not as clear about those things at the time; in fact, I was somewhat confused about what was going on and what I was noticing and experiencing. It was as if we had come up against an invisible barrier, and his ingenuity at nudging me toward an insight-producing experience was running out. Suddenly out of nowhere it seemed to me (and still seems to me now), he said, “Turn the book upside down and read it.” Instantly I felt a total flash of panic that came and went like a lightning bolt through my body; then I think I opened my mind to the possibility of how that might be done and something I have difficulty describing happened. At the distance of a few years I would say it seemed like two self-images colliding; at the time I think I only registered some kind of incongruity in me about what I felt to be real and what might be real, and some kind of powerful tension in that incongruity, which set off a round of uncontrollable laughter, which lasted quite a while. Everybody waited patiently and with interest in the process, and when I had settled down, I believe I read a little more out loud, and that the reading was distinctly different for me and for my audience, in terms of its ease, intelligibility, and engaging quality.

I summarized this incident from a somewhat more “knowing” perspective for the paper analyzing the experience in relation to psychotherapy theories:

*Author: I’ve been engaged for some time in a personal project to explore the psychological ramifications of the Alexander Technique, which led me recently to enroll in a local university’s certificate program designed to give people in the helping professions a basic grounding in psychotherapy theory. In one of my courses, an initial assignment was to describe an experience, from whatever context, that we felt had been therapeutic. Subsequently we were asked to analyze that experience from the point of view of the various psychotherapeutic theories we’ve been studying—in only five pages, double-spaced! In the hope that my beginning efforts to discern what the relationship of the Technique to therapeutic process might be will spark further discussion of the question, I’ve combined and adapted my two papers for the Exchange—with apologies, as the article betrays its original audience (my professor), and is certainly not an exhaustive study.*

I was reading aloud in an Alexander Technique class. Having been asked to “let myself alone” and “allow” the reading to happen, I was not completely successful at that, but was “performing” the reading according to my habit (of which I was partly aware, from previous lessons). The teacher, on a sudden inspiration, asked me to turn the book upside down and read. My acceptance of and willing participation in this paradox created a dialectic between my habit of controlling my performance and the inability to control a nonsensical task—in other words, to carry out the task I really would have to allow something incomprehensibly novel to happen. To do this I would have to let go of the habitual requirement to “get it right,” a requirement I found had been present all along, but operating in the shadows as an assumption or expectation around the task. This dialectic created a sudden and powerful tension around the fear of not knowing how to be right that broke through into a new dimension of awareness and thus a visceral sense of the absurdity of my habit, which made me laugh for quite a while; subsequently I was left with a new experience of myself and of the possibility of allowing things to happen rather than having to make them happen.

When I speak of a “new dimension of awareness,” I am thinking of the kind of experience one has in looking at pictures through a stereopticon; what started out as two separate, flat images suddenly opens up, in the moment of perceptual integration, into a previously unimagined depth, like a new dimension. One experiences a seemingly utterly new reality. What is so transformative about the kind of experience I am describing is that when one is convinced by experience of a new reality, one’s behavior and physical coordination simultaneously change. Awareness of one’s habit is a byproduct of the process, not the primary goal. The primary goal is being able to allow oneself to attend to and experience the conditions that are actually present; in other words, to be in the moment. The effect of being in the moment is to change one’s reality, which necessarily changes one’s behavior. One becomes aware of one’s habit as a psychophysical movement away from being present in oneself, in space, and in the moment, and thus one finally has a choice about acting upon the impulse of one’s habit or not. In brief, one learns to inhibit one’s immediate reaction to a stimulus, thus putting a gap between stimulus and response, creating the opportunity for the exercise of choice and free will.

### **The Experience in Light of Selected Psychotherapy Theories**

I see elements of my “therapeutic experience” echoed in some of the theoretical systems we covered in our course, but as yet I have not found one that fully and exactly mirrors it in process and effect. The elucidation of the student’s assumptions and expectations about the requirements of the situation and about how a response will be carried out (in terms of how it should feel kinesthetically or the nature of the movement involved) is often critical in the process of change in the Alexander Technique. This is highlighted, and a new response is made available, by the inclusion of information not usually accounted for by the student in his or her normal approach to stimuli. Generally this information is kinesthetic in nature. These qualities draw one away from parallels with heavily retrospective approaches such as Freud’s or with behavior therapies employing conditioning, and toward educative, insight- and self-awareness-based approaches such as those of Fritz Perls (Gestalt) and Albert Ellis (Rational-Emotive (Behavioral) Therapy), as well as the experiential therapies. Students’ attention is directed in verbal and nonverbal ways toward information that was always available but actively ignored. As students struggle to account for the difference in perspective provided by including this information, their habitual thinking and the pattern of tension they employ in reacting to stimuli become apparent. The aim of the teacher is to produce a dialectic in the student between the intention to remain present in activity and the habitual movement away from being fully present into a narrowed field of attention, thus creating an experience that challenges habit patterns and the assumptions behind them (what Eric Berne’s Transactional Analysis might refer to as the “shoulds”). Perls in his Gestalt therapy works to do this by directing clients’ attention to previously overlooked behaviors that are incongruous with their simultaneously (consciously) expressed views, while Ellis tries to elucidate the irrational assumptions and ideas in the self-talk of clients that are

driving their behavior. Existential therapists and systemic therapists (such as Jay Haley) also make use of paradox as a technique for change. Existentialists also are opposed to Cartesian dualism, but look to a basic angst about existence that Alexander teachers would not regard as a given. (In fact, the experience of embodiment in space and support involved in the Technique seems existentially reassuring, resolving the oscillation between isolation and being-for-others with a dynamic balance based on maximum information—a unified field of attention—leading to existential “authenticity” through conscious awareness.) Transactional Analysis and Bowenian therapy, like Alexander Technique, stress choice, as well as the responsibility that it restores to the individual. Bowenian therapy also, it seems from the description in my course textbook, makes a similar distinction between reacting and responding.<sup>1</sup> Yet none of these operates from such a thorough-going holistic stance as the Alexander Technique, which might be summarized as an awareness that your (physical) attitude is your (mental) attitude.

The Alexander Technique is not a psychotherapeutic system, but essentially a somatic or psychophysical educational method. Space is made, however (at least in the tradition of Alexander Technique teachers I am connected with), for the processing of emotions as they arise. The understanding is that naturally as one opens up to a fuller experiencing, experiences that one has been avoiding or suppressing will come to consciousness. (To help my students learn to process such feelings more comfortably as they arise, I have made use of the Focusing approach developed by Eugene Gendlin, an experiential psychotherapist.) Because of this there is an awareness that the Technique is not for everyone, and it is not unusual that if students feel that accommodating their real experience would necessitate too great a change in their lives, they will stop coming for lessons, sometimes without warning.

The group setting in which my experience took place provided sharing of experience, mutual observation in learning, and support for risking the “allowing” and letting go of what is thought of as control that is critical to the change process in the Alexander Technique. Such workshop-style groups are also used to facilitate growth in therapeutic systems such as Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, or the Humanistic therapies. However, a group setting is not required, or even the norm, in Alexander lessons, so it remains a peripheral connection with these psychotherapy systems.

As in Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, and Rational-Emotive (Behavioral) Therapy, students are encouraged to read about and beyond the Alexander Technique and to attend workshops to widen their understanding of what they are experiencing in lessons, as it is students’ thinking (in the largest sense) that is seen as critical. They are not in lessons to be “fixed” or “treated,” but to change through learning. Alexander teachers recognize, however, that students usually come to lessons looking for a “symptomectomy”: for things to be better without the student needing to change.

The congruence, genuineness, empathy, and positive regard demanded by the Rogerian approach are also deliberately cultivated by the Alexander teachers of the tradition I am connected with, and are regarded as necessary conditions for the student feeling comfortable enough to experiment with doing without his habit and learning something new. F.M. Alexander himself stressed that “unduly excited fear reflexes” make learning a near impossibility, and not just for Alexander students, but in schools generally. Congruence takes on a special meaning for Alexander teachers, whose modeling of use and awareness in all their interactions (verbal, visual, and in hands-on contact) with their students is considered a critical influence and support for the student’s suspending habit and allowing a new way of being and doing to emerge (similar to the modeling offered by Bowenian therapists). Teachers offer stories of their own struggles and experiences to encourage and reassure their students. They also open themselves to intuition, as my teacher did in this case. When I discovered the writings of Carl Rogers, I found them extremely helpful in understanding the multi-faceted discipline involved in establishing an optimal teacher-student rapport. Still, while these necessary conditions do much to soften the initial rigidity of students in their use and feeling-tone, and support them as they risk changing, they are not sufficient to explain the central process of change in students of the Alexander

Technique. As later person-centered therapists seem to be doing, Alexander teachers draw on other knowledge to trigger change in students.

There do seem to be critical areas of knowledge for Alexander teachers; a central piece is what is called the “primary control of coordination,” the availability of the head-neck reflexes to operate freely, and how to persuade the student to inhibit interference with those reflexes, through verbal instruction and hands-on contact, particularly while the student carries out an activity of some kind. Also critical is the knowledge through experience that, since most adults interfere to some degree with that availability and even identify with the feeling that produces, restoration of the delicate balance of the head and neck (which can also be accomplished by widening the field of attention to include self *and* environment) will produce fairly predictable changes in the student’s experience, changes that are often experienced by the student as quite profound and existential in nature.

An idea I have used consistently to understand (and help my students understand) the resistances that arise when habit is suspended is the “hunger illusion” discussed by George Weinberg. One might say that students, when they inhibit (as Weinberg puts it, “starve”) their habit, tend to hear the voice behind their “shoulds.” Such thoughts appear to the student as unquestionable absolutes; it is the teacher’s job to then suggest challenging the validity of those thoughts that drive behavior. In the case of my experience, the hunger illusion would be the idea that I need to control my performance, to “get it right.” When I could see that assumption, I could at last challenge it, and allow a new behavior to emerge. (Weinberg allies himself with *action therapy*, which aims to “help the person see how he is renewing his own basic view of himself and life, and discover by which new choices he can create a whole new view—and in this sense, cure himself.” Such a view seems to me highly consonant with the Alexander Technique.)

Looking beyond the psychotherapy theories we studied in our course, the closest analogies to my therapeutic experience I have found are in the literature of the martial arts (where, for example, the archer experiences the arrow as shooting itself, as he allows his intention to be carried out without “doing” it), Zen Buddhist meditation (where posture *is* enlightenment, and *kensho*—sudden enlightenment—is preceded by a struggle with paradox and is often associated with profound laughter), and Buddhist psychology (which views the average normal person as being somewhat less insane than others rather than fully sane, due to the unwillingness and inability to perceive things as they are).

*Part Two of this article will appear in the next issue of Exchange.*

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## From the Chair

*Continued from page 3*

*tive* aspects of the individual teacher, rather than the *quantitative* aspects of a Training Course. ATI acknowledges that individuals may have varied backgrounds of training, and may or may not have attended one of the training schools approved by another professional society. Some people choose to apprentice with a senior teacher, others train in different countries around the world, and some students study over an extended period of time.

ATI has made it possible for these students who are committed to becoming a Teacher of the Alexander Technique to have the chance to be assessed by Sponsoring Members in accordance with the ATI Certification process and to become certified as a Teacher, *if* they are competent enough to be approved. While ATI “recognizes” a teacher’s membership in other societies as something that makes them eligible to join ATI as a Teaching Member, *ATI does not in any way or form run, approve, or otherwise involve itself in Training Courses.* This stance on Certification and Sponsorship is at the center of ATI’s whole ethos.

You’ll find below the new ATI Certification Criteria that were passed by the membership in October 2000 at our AGM in Ireland. This is a work in progress that will continue to evolve to meet the needs of our membership.

At this time we are gathering information to help us further understand how we, as an organization with membership spread throughout the world, can interface with other organizations. We look forward to opportunities in the future to dialogue with other Alexander Technique organizations to acknowledge any similar vision we have for bringing the Alexander Technique to the public.

### **ATI Criteria for Evaluating the Competencies of Teachers**

*Adopted by the Membership, October, 2000*

In order to be eligible for certification by Alexander Technique International, teacher-candidates should be of good character, have a clear understanding of the Alexander Technique concepts and principles, and have the basic skills to convey these concepts and principles clearly to a pupil.

#### **I. Conduct**

A. Demonstrate qualities of patience, compassion, honesty, and respect in interactions with peers and students. Completion of an Alexander Technique Training process shall be considered representation by the candidate’s trainer(s) that the candidate has satisfactorily demonstrated these characteristics of patience, compassion, honesty, and respect in interactions with peers and students, provided the examining teacher sees no evidence to the contrary.

#### **II. Knowledge**

A. Demonstrate an embodied understanding of the commonly used Alexander Technique concepts and principles by consciously allowing a positive change in their own psycho-physical coordination, and continuing this change throughout any activity in order to improve the quality of their performance. This positive change can be observed as 1) an initial movement of the head in relation to the spine which results in a quality of lengthening throughout the body, allowing the person to respond in a fluid and continually adaptive way to gravity; 2) an enhanced alertness, awareness, fluidity, and poise; 3) and a speaking voice that is full, clear, and fluent.

B. Demonstrate a knowledge of Alexander's ideas by discussing their own understanding of the Technique and how Alexander's ideas have influenced their development as a person and a teacher; and suggest what literature (by Alexander or other authors) they would recommend to a pupil and why.

C. Demonstrate an understanding of anatomy and physiology as they relate to human movement and behavior; be able to help pupils understand how mistaken ideas about their structure interfere with their best use; answer pupils' basic questions about anatomy, and refer them to other sources for more detailed answers.

D. Demonstrate an understanding of the ATI Code of Ethics, an appreciation of safety issues, and know when it is appropriate to refer a pupil to another professional.

### **III. Teaching Skills**

A. Demonstrate an ability to clearly and simply communicate and demonstrate the concepts and principles of the Alexander Technique by giving clear demonstrations and verbal explanations that are appropriate to the pupil's learning in the moment; when using hands, to use their hands sensitively and appropriately. Both verbal explanations and any use of hands will allow pupils to effect a positive change in their psycho-physical coordination.

B. Demonstrate an ability to observe themselves while teaching, and later articulate to an observer the choices they made with regard to using their hands, verbal explanations, and physical demonstrations.

Any applicant who has not been endorsed may undertake further study and re-apply to the same sponsor at a later date or may apply to a different sponsor. Each applicant needs the endorsement of three ATI Sponsors. ☺

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## **Worldwide Offices of Alexander Technique International**

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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, 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.

Olympic-level athletes have similarly used the Technique to improve their performance, as have leading golfers and business people. Medical studies have shown the Technique to be as effective in lowering blood pressure as the normally prescribed beta-blocking drugs. Other studies have shown significant improvement in respiratory function.

The common factor in all of these 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 uses himself in everyday life, will find that this simple procedure can have far-reaching results.

Further information about the Alexander Technique can perhaps best be gained from a teacher near you (see list at right for the nearest ATI office for teacher listings, or visit [www.ati-net.com](http://www.ati-net.com)), 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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