

“UPWARDLY MOBILE”
by Linda Gillard
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It’s an odd feeling, being able to pinpoint a sentence that changed your life. Sounds corny, but when my GP said, “If I were you, I should have some lessons in the Alexander Technique”, it really was the beginning of something.

Over a period of 13 years I have consulted GPs., osteopaths, physiotherapists, and chiropractors in an attempt to rid myself of a disabling back pain for which, it had appeared, there was no real physical cause. I had heard of the Alexander Technique but didn’t know much about it. I thought it was mainly for people with bad posture and I didn’t have bad posture. On the contrary, I was so aware of the dangers of bad posture – especially if you have a bad back and look after small children – that I went to great pains to try to correct it. Great pains But more of that later.

So I didn’t bother with Alexander, whoever he was. I couldn’t see the point in having dozens of lessons on how to stand up straight when what I obviously needed was manipulation or, better still, traction. I soldiered on, becoming more and more depressed. Then I noticed that someone was giving a one-day introductory workshop on the Technique in Norwich. So along I went. The rest is medical history. . Well, it is in this family.

The workshop was conducted by Jonathan Drake, who subsequently became my Alexander teacher. During the course of this momentous first day, Jonathan told us the story of F. Matthias Alexander, a Tasmanian actor who developed the Technique in the 1880s. His acting career was blighted by voice problems and, as no doctor was able to help him, Alexander decided to make study of himself and how he used his voice to see if he could identify what was causing his loss of voice. After much patient observation using a long mirror, Alexander realised he had been unconsciously distorting his neck and spine, thereby placing great and habitual strain on his larynx. By stopping these abuses of his body, which took him years to achieve, he found he was able to maintain very good voice production as well as better physical co-ordination.

Alexander noted that his condition was far from uncommon. He discovered that most people suffered from this kind of “disco-ordination” and had lost the proper relationship between head, neck and back or what he called the Primary Control. Alexander observed that people suffered as a consequence from stress, strain, pain and fatigue in their everyday lives. Many of the things they did that were intended to alleviate such distress, like remedial exercises or relaxation in poorly designed chairs, actually aggravated the condition, as did my own attempts to “correct” my posture and relieve strain.

Alexander found that people adjusted so well to habitual misuse of the body that they could no longer tell what was “good use”, straight or balanced. Their brain deceived them by accepting the habitual misuse and informing the body that the distortion was “normal”. This collusion was graphically illustrated during my workshop, when I volunteered to have my posture corrected. I stood up straight, in my normal way, and Jonathan pointed out that I appeared to be attempting to fall over backwards. He then set about rearranging my body into a position of “mechanical advantage”, i.e., he made me stand naturally poised, relaxed, but not collapsed. And how did I feel? Terrible. I felt as if I was standing like a monkey, and I said so. Jonathan beamed.

Apparently, when you feel like that you’re well on the way to achieving “good use” but until the body becomes accustomed to the new position you feel as if your whole frame is distorted. So what is the “good use” that Alexander referred to? Can it be taught? Does it take years to learn? It takes just five minutes to grasp the principles of the Technique and a lifetime to practise them. It cannot be learned without a teacher, although a few lessons may be more beneficial than none at all – depending on how easy you find it to let go of bad habits. I felt an improvement after just a handful of lessons.

After three months, my back pain had virtually disappeared; I no longer woke up with nauseous headaches and walking had become a pleasure. I now recognise the onset of my back trouble and I know how to deal with it. I know exactly what is causing it and I know how to make it go away. By giving myself “directions”, I realign my spine and head and after a short while the pain vanishes. No drugs, no gin, no traction. The Technique has given me the miraculous power to heal myself. It is nothing short of magic – but with a little common sense.

An Alexander teacher will be able to tell you, immediately and without X-rays (you won’t even have to undress), what you are doing to put strain on your body. He or she will then show you how to “undo” it. You will be asked to lie down with your head supported on a couple of paperback books. The teacher will show you how to give “directions” to the body and those directions will always be the same – “let the neck be free . . . to let the head go forward and up . . . to let the back lengthen and widen . . .”

You will graduate to a standing position, but still with the same directions. As the teacher gives these directions, he will gently lay his hands on your head, neck and back, encouraging the slightest of adjustments so your head balances on top of the spinal column like a ping-pong ball poised on a jet of air. Then it’s up to you. You have the knowledge and the actual experience, under the guidance of the teacher’s hands, of how your body could and should be functioning. Life then becomes a quest for the re-creation of that extraordinary sense of lightness, freedom and easy movement that you experience during the lessons.

That in a nutshell, is the Alexander Technique; and it is learning to give those directions to my body myself that has freed me from back pain. I have not been manipulated, I haven’t done any exercises. I have simply lain down for 10 to 20 minutes a day in the prescribed position and thought about the Technique as I performed everyday tasks. I have corrected myself constantly and, as a consequence, I have occasionally succumbed to Alexander’s Gloom – a form of mild depression that can beset the new pupil when he realises that he is doing everything wrong.

It isn’t easy to practise the Technique because there are no exercises, goals, or things “to get right”, as my teacher has said to me over and over again. You have to learn not do certain things and to inhibit your habitual responses – mental and physical – to a particular stimulus. You have to go back to basics and re-educate the body to return to the way you used to move, quite naturally, as a child. (If you want to see the Technique in action observe any toddler crouching over a sandpit or watch a baby as it balance the great weight of its head on top of its spinal column.)

Your teacher will help you with patient encouragement and by his or her own physical example of “good use”. Remember though that the relationship is one of teacher/pupil and not doctor/patient. The teacher and the pupil are both learning – the Alexander Technique is, after all a life sentence. A good teacher approaches the pupil and the Technique in all humility, knowing there is always room for improvement in his own body use. Pupils and teachers are striving together for a more conscious use of the body.

My teacher trained in orthodox medicine, but was drawn to the Technique through his own experience of back trouble. Jonathan found that, whereas doctors treated the symptoms, Alexander teachers examine causes. He changed direction and trained for three more years as a teacher of the Technique

To learn the Alexander Technique requires a massive mental adjustment. What you do with your body is barely perceptible except to the trained eye; what you have to do with your mind is rather more radical. Ask yourself, do you actually want to change the habits of a lifetime? Most people don’t. Most people want to “change” and yet remain the same. Do you actually want to let go of all your pain? I have no excuse not to do the housework now and if I scream at the children I can no longer blame it on one of my headaches. You win some, you lose some. . . but with the Alexander Technique, mostly you win.