

# The ALEXANDRIAN

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## "How It Works"

**A Review of Ann Mathews' "Implications for Education in the work of F. M. Alexander: an Experimental Project in a Public Classroom." A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education. Bank Street College of Education. 1984.**

by Walter Carrington

This monograph can be strongly recommended to anyone who cares for children, whether as a teacher or a parent. All of us who have experienced the benefits of the Alexander Technique for ourselves have at some time pondered the question: "How do you teach the Alexander Technique to a child?" Ann Mathews' brilliant thesis gives an answer based on practical experience and profound thought and it is both original and persuasive.

To most of us, the essential difficulty lies in conceiving how such a Technique can be satisfactorily taught as a subject in a school curriculum. The striking feature of our first Alexander lessons was the experience of lightness and freedom we gained from somebody else's hands; but clearly such a process demands a degree of individual attention difficult to provide in a classroom. Furthermore, children, for the most part, would appear to need less of this helping hand than the average pulled-down and malcoordinated adult. They need more of an approach that will kindle interest in how their bodies work, in what they are able to do if they want to, in how to cultivate different skills, in how they use themselves and their individual endowment to the best advantage. They need help and encouragement to feel and think and reason and to use all their faculties in whatever they are doing.

It may be remembered, however, that Alexander himself did not enjoy the benefit of another person's hands. His experience of his own technique was quite different from ours. It was, for him, a matter of observation and experiment and then of understanding and conscious awareness of how his body worked. The benefits that he derived were the product of a complex process of rational thought, of choice and decision, of conscious direction and refusal to give consent to what he saw to be wrong, of the exercise of the will. He was fond of children and had a natural gift for communicating with them. It is said that he wrote much of *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* with his adopted daughter Peggy sitting on his knee. He thought and wrote a great deal about the problems of teaching children and the principles which, as he put it, "will enable us to decide as to the best methods of educating our children." It may be recalled that he wrote: "The characteristic note of true happiness is struck when the healthy child is busily engaged in doing something which interests it." He was convinced that most children love to apply their natural curiosity for finding out "how it works" to themselves. He said that especially they loved to be invited to play a game of "withholding consent," of saying "no" to a request calling for an immediate, habitual, and unthinking response, to be invited to think what they are doing.

How this sort of teaching can be carried out in a public school classroom is the subject of Ann Mathews' *Experimental Project* and her conclusions invite close study and consideration. She says: "It is my feeling that a serious student of the Technique who has begun to be

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## The Alexander Technique: Revitalizing the Dancer's Self-Image

by Meade Andrews

As a university dance teacher, I have noticed that many students separate their "dance posture" from the way they move habitually outside the classroom. While working in class, students focus on maintaining a lifted, sometimes overly extended verticality; once the class is over, though, I see them slump or slouch as they walk or sit. Focusing on the goal-oriented approach of overextension ultimately results in fatigue, indicated by the postural slump. The student works hard to "stand up straight" in class, and collapses afterward to ease the strain of this forced postural ideal.

Traditionally, the dancer's ideal posture involves an extreme degree of uprightness or verticality, known as "pulling up." Because dancers' movements encompass a range far beyond the movement requirements of daily life, notions of correct alignment can also take an extreme turn. However, overemphasis on the vertical dimension of the body can result in an attenuated, excessively effortful, or frozen-looking image for the dancer. Acknowledging the secondary dimensions of the body—width and depth—gives the dancer a softer, fuller quality without sacrificing the primary goal of length. In reality, our bodies are capable of a more expansive and flexible postural support while traveling through a variety of movements with complex spatial configurations.

A three-dimensional approach to dynamic postural balance promotes both the stability and the mobility necessary for the dancer's heightened vocabulary. Standard alignment procedures which incorporate holding any part of the body in a static position are actually counterproductive for the dancer who wants to improve coordination and move with increased ease and flexibility.

Although many dancers today are studying movement re-education techniques such as Ideokinesis, the Bartenieff Fundamentals, and the Alexander Technique, the more entrenched concept of correct placement still prevails. *Correct placement* is a blanket term many dancers use to describe a series of visual and kinesthetic requirements for optimal body alignment. The following phrases are most often heard in the dance classroom to reinforce this concept: "Straighten your spine." "Lift your chest." "Hold your shoulders down." "Pull up in your abdominals." "Tuck your pelvis under." The words "lift," "hold," "pull" and "tuck" can all too easily generate patterns of unnecessary tension in the dancer's body. "Lift" and "pull" suggest a degree of force that can result in an inappropriately tense or inefficient approach to movement. "Hold" and "tuck" are static words, implying a position-oriented rather than a motion-oriented approach to dancing. For the dancer working with these concepts of placement, the task of moving in space then presents a series of conflicting goals. The muscles closer to the body's outer surface, designed to articulate the limbs in space, are "on hold," while the deeper, more structurally supportive musculature is not being fully activated. The dancer begins to strain against excessively contracted muscles and overly compressed joints in order to accomplish the vast range of movement possibilities involved in every dance class. Inefficient movement habits are established, and over time may cause injury.

The dilemma created by notions of correct placement is heightened when the dance teacher gives the student specific, nonverbal corrections. As the instructor walks around the classroom, she may use her hands to position the dancer's head in a more vertical relationship to her spine, or place her rib cage over her pelvis. The student must then

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# Directing Your Childbirth

by Kathleen Lawrence

In his book, *The Universal Constant in Living*, F. M. Alexander discusses the application of his technique to childbirth.<sup>1</sup> He cites the example of a woman whose labor and recovery with her second child differed greatly from her disastrous first labor, which had been before she studied with Alexander. He also quotes one of his medical supporters, a gynecologist who attests to the importance of a woman's Use during labor. As usual, Alexander is ahead of his time. His thought anticipates the revolution in birthing methods brought about when both doctors and patients realized that mother and baby are healthier and labor less painful when women participate consciously in their own labor. Perhaps not surprisingly, each of the three most widely known childbirth preparation techniques today—Lamaze,<sup>2</sup> Bradley,<sup>3</sup> and Kitzinger<sup>4</sup>—teaches women this conscious control in ways harmonious with the Alexander Technique. These methods understand the significance of awareness and correct anatomical functioning. A cross-pollination of these methods with the Alexander Technique could produce a new childbirth preparation technique complemented by the ideas of inhibition and primary control.

Like Alexander, Lamaze, Bradley, and Kitzinger believe that mind and body are one: in the crisis of labor, each is especially sensitive to the other. Lamaze calls his method "psychoprophylactic" and Kitzinger calls hers "psychosexual." If a woman is to take part successfully in her labor, she must attain conscious control over those parts of her body that she can change, thus allowing the uterus to perform unimpeded by excess tension. Lessons in awareness begin during pregnancy when women are asked to notice their habits of tension. For example, Kitzinger asks women to observe what happens when they lift a heavy pot from the stove; she does not impose "relaxation" exercises that ignore individual habits. Like Alexander, Kitzinger believes in the connection between what one does to oneself in everyday use and what happens under stress. Lamaze designs awareness exercises that resemble an Alexander table lesson. He asks the labor coach to help his partner lengthen her muscles by letting the coach take the weight of each limb. Next, the future mother alternately tenses and releases her limbs, thereby learning the difference between ease and strain. The coach then gently places his hands on specific areas of tension, such as the neck and shoulders, asking them to let go.

What Lamaze, Bradley, and Kitzinger teach is that proper Use of the psychophysical organism in labor matches proper Use in everyday activities. As Kitzinger emphasizes, labor is not an athletic event. It is not a time to do but to be. During labor, a woman must allow herself literally to be opened. Working extraneous muscles will sap vital energy from the uterus, creating an internal tug-of-war and perhaps slowing labor. Although childbirth preparation techniques do not explicitly refer to Alexander's concept of inhibition, they in fact want women to say "no" to doing too much during labor. Lamaze hopes that varied breathing rhythms will take the place of overworking. Kitzinger wants women to go limp at the start of each contraction. She suggests that women pretend to be a ripe camembert cheese, runny at the sides, or to imagine they are a bubble floating on the ocean. Through this kind of imagery and visualization, they can free themselves to let labor happen. Bradley reminds women to perform like other mammals, quietly breathing in a state of simple calm. Alexander's idea of inhibition complements these attempts toward effortlessness. It provides a new way of thinking for women in labor, a discipline for staying with the ease and openness aimed for by Lamaze, Bradley, and Kitzinger.

Teachers and students of the Alexander Technique with whom I've spoken disagree about whether or not it is possible to "direct" during labor. Some say it is impossible to direct energy out when the uterus pulls the body relentlessly inward. Others claim to have been able to direct the head to move up off the spine, at least during the brief moments of rest between contractions. One teacher actually assumed "monkey" during her contractions. Another used Alexander's verbal directions to "stay back" and "do less" throughout labor. She repeated them to herself just as she did when teaching a lesson, depending on the fact that "energy follows thought." According to Lamaze, language is a significant variable of a woman's experience in labor. He claims

that fear and pain in labor are the result of associating negative ideas, sentences, and phrases that one has heard about childbirth with labor contractions. He teaches women to associate contractions with varied breathing rhythms instead of trauma. Using Alexander's verbal directions to greet each contraction might enable women to stay even more in touch with their whole body rather than being distracted from themselves by breathing.

No childbirth preparation technique can extricate a woman from a treacherous labor. Many women are angry with Lamaze because it promises them a painless childbirth if they practice the exercises and perform them correctly. When labor is difficult and drugs are necessary, these women feel judged and guilty. Lamaze, and Bradley too, can make women feel like failures. Here is the crucial difference between these techniques and the Alexander Technique. Alexander's principles could provide a way of thinking throughout pregnancy and childbirth aimed at responding to whatever situation arises, not aimed at producing certain results. Dozens of women have already creatively applied the Alexander Technique to their needs during labor and pregnancy. As they talk and write about their experiences, the work begun by F. M. Alexander will continue to evolve and grow.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>F. M. Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living*, Surrey, Re-Educational Publications Ltd., 1941, pp. 44-48.

<sup>2</sup>Fernand Lamaze, *Painless Childbirth*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1972.

<sup>3</sup>Robert A. Bradley, *Husband-Coached Childbirth*, New York, Harper and Row, 1965.

<sup>4</sup>Sheila Kitzinger, *The Experience of Childbirth*, Middlesex, Penquin Books, 1962.

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## CAUSE OF LUMBAR BACK PAIN (continued from page 3)

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Published by John Gorman, Oaklands, New Mill Lane, Eversley, Basingstoke, Hants, RG27 0RA, England. Available by post for £4.95 in the U.K., £7.00 (equivalent) in Europe and £8.00 (equivalent) in the US and Canada.

<sup>2</sup>In some respects, Gorman's book is reminiscent of the works of Mabel Ellsworth Todd, the American movement educator and author of such volumes as *The Thinking Body—A Study of the Balancing Forces in Man*, and *The Hidden You* (originally published in 1937 and 1953, respectively and re-issued in paperback by Dance Horizons, Brooklyn, NY). Todd was very fond of using civil and mechanical engineering analogies to describe the form and function of the human body, although her analyses tended, on the whole, to be more static than those found in Gorman's book.

## BOOK OF THE BACK (continued from page 3)

strands of inquiry and treatment have been suppressed; others have survived only after passing through periods of intense ridicule and legislative restriction.

Today, for example, chiropractors flourish in North America and osteopaths have a firm toe-hold in Great Britain; both groups, however, have had to withstand virulent attacks from orthodox medical practitioners.<sup>2</sup> At the present time, our own profession is still too small to be a threat to any other group. Nonetheless, with the current rapid growth in our numbers, I believe every Alexander teacher would do well to study the historical record contained in *The Book of the Back* in order to be prepared for possible trouble in the future.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Book of the Back*, Brian Inglis, New York and London (Hearst Books and Ebury Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that British and American osteopaths differ significantly in their training and areas of expertise.

## Two Reviews by Rickover

Robert M. Rickover, formerly a metallurgist, is an economist, writer and teacher of the Alexander Technique in Toronto.

### THE BOOK OF THE BACK by Brian Inglis

A few months ago, I went through a period of severe lower back pain which more or less incapacitated me for several days. As an Alexander teacher, I was perhaps naturally a little surprised to find that I was still subject to such dire contingencies. And not a little embarrassed, particularly as the pain's onslaught occurred while giving a lesson.

During the course of my recovery, I made two important discoveries. First, back pain such as mine is not at all uncommon in our profession. Indeed, I found that some of the most experienced and highly qualified teachers I knew had gone through similar episodes. Second, although vague terms like lumbago and sciatica were frequently invoked, nobody, including myself, was able to say with any degree of precision what was going on.

Quite possibly I had been misusing myself in some way, perhaps over a period of time. But in the midst of the crisis, what seemed to matter most was understanding the immediate cause of my pain and immobility, the possible dangers, if any, inherent in the situation, and the precautions which ought to be taken. My training and experience as an Alexander teacher, I found, did not adequately prepare me for these questions.

I therefore decided to learn how the medical profession analyses and treats such conditions. In the process, I have read a great deal on the subject, though with generally disappointing results. Most books, I found, promote one of the various orthodox points of view and dismiss (or more generally ignore) the others. *The Book of the Back* by Brian Inglis is a refreshing exception to this pattern.<sup>1</sup>

Inglis provides a lucid survey of all the major therapies, orthodox and unorthodox, which are available to the backache sufferer. The way in which each therapy analyses the causes of back pain is summarised, not with a view to promoting any one of them, but simply in order to give some guidance as to what the options (and the risks) are. Included is a brief description of the Alexander Technique.

*The Book of the Back* makes especially useful reading for an Alexander teacher for two reasons. First, many of our pupils have tried one or more of these therapies, so it is clearly in our interest as professionals to know as much about them as possible. Moreover, this knowledge could be extremely useful for any teacher seeking help in dealing with his or her own backache.

As Inglis observes, his survey does not point to any one approach as being the most reliable; this is the bad news. The good news is that treating back pain by doing nothing except resting is usually as effective as anything else. (I opted for this course of action—or rather inaction—and found that once the worst of the pain was gone, I was able to apply my Alexander training to myself with excellent results.)

Apart from his summary of current trends in the analysis and treatment of backache, Inglis chronicles the evolution of the various professional groups treating back pain which have emerged over the past hundred years or so. We learn, for instance, of the often bitter rivalries between, on the one hand, the more established physicians and surgeons and, on the other, the "upstart" osteopaths and chiropractors, as well as the caste systems operating within each of these groups. We learn too of the banishment of traditional bone-setters from all but the geographical fringes of Britain and Ireland, despite their notable (though largely unexplained) successes.

This brings me to a second reason why I believe reading this book is important for our profession. As Inglis' accounts make all too clear, when health care issues become intertwined with questions of politics and economic gain, the results are frequently not happy ones for either the individual patient or for the advance of knowledge. Many promising

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### THE CAUSE OF LUMBAR BACK PAIN AND THE SOLUTION by John Gorman

Ever since I first heard the story of Alexander's discovery, I have wondered how another individual, coming from a different background but sharing Alexander's determination, might have proceeded under similar circumstances. Alexander was, after all, a Shakespearean reciter who grew up in a pioneer society. His theatrical talents and resourcefulness must surely have influenced the manner in which he tackled his voice problem and the Technique which consequently emerged. The story of John Gorman's comparable physical problem and his approach, as a highly qualified engineer, to analysing and solving it, provides just such an intriguing comparison and contrast to Alexander's procedure.

Suffering from persistent back pain, Gorman, like Alexander, became determined to find the cause of his own problem, even though this led him into a field of enquiry hitherto outside his professional experience—namely the "mechanics" of the human body, rather than of insentient machinery. In *The Cause of Lumbar Back Pain and the Solution*<sup>1</sup> (subtitled: "An Engineering Analysis of the Human Lumbar Spine, the Reasons for its Problems in our Modern Lifestyle, and a General Solution"), he gives us a detailed account of both his approach and his conclusions.

For two reasons, the book is of great usefulness and interest to members of the Alexander teaching profession. First, both the similarities and the contrasts to Alexander's own quest can provide us with insights into the origins and development of our own work. Second, Gorman presents an excellent mechanical analysis of the human body which helps clarify our understanding of the dynamics of human movement.<sup>2</sup> Precisely because Gorman is not trained as a medical man or an anatomist, his descriptions never get bogged down in a mass of anatomical detail. Gorman is primarily interested in the broad relationships between design and function of the body and in the harmful effects of distortions in the musculoskeletal framework. Deduced as they are from engineering principles, his views provide a refreshing and often illuminating alternative to conventional medical attitudes.

Throughout the book, Gorman emphasizes what he considers to be the primary cause of lower back pain, namely the undue flexibility of the lumbar spine in modern man and the consequent distortion this produces in its shape—as well as that of the adjacent thoracic spine and the orientation of the pelvis. These distortions, he argues, are a result of our faulty sitting patterns. His solution consists of a combination of three possible sitting arrangements: one arising from his observation of primitive peoples; one from Gorman's exposure to the Alexander Technique (apparently after he made his main discoveries); and a third which uses a special chair designed by himself to provide support for the pelvic region.

It is not possible in a few paragraphs to outline his arguments in a way which would do them justice. The emphasis is generally very much on altering sitting positions in order to discourage the distortions mentioned above. In this sense, his approach differs significantly from that of Alexander who sought and found a solution within himself. Nonetheless, Gorman's ideas, for the most part sensible and complementary to our own work, make his book well worth reading.

Potential readers should, however, be prepared to do battle at times with the writer's occasional failure to clarify some of the mechanical relationships to which he refers, a problem compounded by a literary style uncomfortably reminiscent of engineer report-writing. It is to be hoped that these rough edges will not obscure Gorman's real and fundamental contributions.

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## REVITALIZING SELF-IMAGE (continued from page 1)

cope with three conflicting activities: inhibiting the previously learned postural habit, maintaining the new position suggested by the teacher, and attempting to move.

Movement requires a complex coordination of muscular patterning, controlled by the central nervous system. Positioning various body parts or singling out a particular muscle for "pulling up" interferes with the body's natural overall coordination process. To promote lasting change in the quality, timing, and execution of their movement, students must change their thinking about their approach to dancing. No amount of external positioning can substitute for changing individual thought patterns, which form the basis for all movement patterns, whether faulty or efficient.

As a means of integrating thought and movement into a construct involving the *whole self*, the Alexander Technique is uniquely influential as an approach to movement re-education. Through this process-oriented system, the dance student can begin to exchange faulty movement patterns for a new coordination based on ease and flexibility. Because the Alexander Technique focuses on *movement* rather than *position*, students learn an approach to alignment that is dynamic rather than static. Their dancing is enriched by a developing ability to see the underlying organizational patterns of the movement demonstrated by the teacher. Learning to dance by imitating visual shapes is replaced by a new awareness of the whole fabric of a movement combination.

The dancer who decides to study the Alexander Technique with the guidance of a qualified Alexander teacher learns to re-educate and refine his kinesthetic awareness. First, he begins to observe his personal movement habits; these habits may or may not be useful in the efficient accomplishment of any given task, whether that be dancing, typing, or walking. As the teacher helps him to become aware of these habits, the dancer discovers the possibility of *choice*: he develops higher standards of kinesthetic awareness which enable him to decide whether these habitual patterns are useful in a particular activity. If former habits do not prove useful, the dancer can learn to prevent them by redirecting his energy toward a new, more efficient approach to the task.

The dancer can utilize the principles of the Alexander Technique to reason out specific problems encountered in class, such as loss of balance on a particular turn; or learn to link a series of movement phrases together with more intelligence and clarity. Performance quality improves as well. A recent guest artist teaching at my university enthusiastically noticed a marked change in one student's dancing. He observed that she was moving with more fluidity and less strain, and that her whole body seemed integrated and clearly directed through space. He did not know that she had been studying the Alexander Technique, but his comments reflect similar observations made by numerous people who have studied the work, whatever their artistic discipline.

Study of the Alexander Technique offers the dancer a new approach to movement, located between the rigid posture of correct placement and the collapse which usually follows. Because the technique focuses on a harmonious relationship between stability and mobility in the entire body, dancers begin to rediscover the expansive joy of exploring their own movement potential—the reason we all dance.

In the dance world today, a student may find a technique teacher who is also a qualified Alexander instructor; she can then experience the direct application of the Alexander principles to specific dance combinations. The student can also learn to utilize these concepts when working with teachers who speak a different dance language. The sequence of directional thinking can then become a foundation for working with any dance style.

The Alexander Technique encourages dance students to enhance the reliability of their thinking powers and observational abilities. Dancers can begin to work responsibly toward the optimal direction of their own use, ultimately becoming their own best teacher.

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## HOW IT WORKS (continued from page 1)

aware, has confronted some habits and begun to change, can work with young children with a greater or lesser degree of success. This is so because, although Habit may seem to be entrenched, children's bodies are not yet set as they will be later on. In addition, children are much closer in time than adults to their own instinctively natural use and proprioceptive awareness, and this makes the re-education a simpler matter for child and teacher." She has produced a fascinating account of her research and we are all very much in her debt.

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Walter Carrington was a student of F. M. Alexander, and his teaching assistant for many years. He and his wife, Dilys Carrington, are Directors of the Constructive Teaching Center Ltd., London.

## Editorial Note

This issue of *The Alexandrian* features some "firsts" in article content: the Alexander Technique in relation to dance training and childbirth. Thanks to Dr. Meade Andrews and to Kathleen Lawrence for their timely and pertinent contributions.

It is a special pleasure to publish Walter Carrington's review of Ann Mathews' Master's Thesis because Ann is not only a graduate of the ACAT-NY Teacher Training Program, but she has also given much appreciated encouragement in the work of bringing out *The Alexandrian*. Thanks to Walter for writing this review on short notice—his beautifully expressed insights never fail to illumine both the material at hand the Alexander field in general. The Spring-Summer issue will carry excerpts from Ann's thesis: readers interested in contacting her may do so c/o Institute for Research, Development and Education in the Alexander Technique, 74 MacDougal Street, NY, NY 10012.

Thanks also to perennial contributor Robert Rickover for his reviews of books not likely to come to the attention of most Alexander teachers. Robert wishes readers to know that the full version of his "Seeing and Moving" (Autumn, 1984) is available from him for \$1.00 at: Apt. 604, 190 St. George St., Toronto, Ontario M5R 2N4. Two lengthy quotations were omitted for space reasons in the published version. I would like to let Bob know publicly that many readers expressed their admiration for this article.

Angela Caine, whose "Fear of Singing" also appeared in the Autumn issue, has produced a text and cassette for home study called *Work On Your Voice*. It is available from her at Swan House, Norton, Norwich, NR14 6RT, price £10 plus £1 shipping.

Belated but sincere wishes for a Happy New Year from ACAT-NY and *The Alexandrian*.

—Ron Dennis