

The ALEXANDRIAN

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Editorial

The last sentence of Professor Raymond A. Dart's "An Anatomist's Tribute to F. Matthias Alexander," the Annual Memorial Lecture delivered before the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique on March 20th, 1970, reads:

It is a reasonable inference that each individual's part in the totality of human social behaviour is not confined in its effectiveness to the skill we succeed in attaining bodily and mentally in our use of ourselves but extends far beyond our daily acts and thoughts to our becoming as skilled as possible, as Alexander himself did, in communicating our knowledge about that better usage to others by the human practices of recording, of speaking and also of writing thereupon.

This is the spirit that has animated *The Alexandrian* and that we trust will sustain it on a long and fruitful career.

As publishers, we of the American Center for the Alexander Technique, New York, feel a special responsibility to the Alexander community-at-large with respect to the impact of this journal both on our professional group and on the general public. We therefore wish to present the broadest possible spectrum of content, and cordially solicit relevant manuscripts from anyone involved with or interested in the Alexander Technique—teachers, students, or others, domestic or foreign. For the present, space requirements suggest shorter articles, although longer ones will be considered for serialization. Current plans call for three issues per year, published in September, December, and March.

This first issue illustrates the range and depth that we intend to maintain. Judith Leibowitz's distillation of her long teaching experience is a statement that speaks to all Alexander students, new and old alike. John Austin's report previews what we can expect as Alexander research, in the tradition established by Frank Pierce Jones, continues. Ron Dennis's note carries along a line of critical writing in the Technique begun notably by Lulie Westfeldt and Wilfred Barlow. Goddard Binkley's setting of the Alexander 'directions' is both artful and useful. And finally, Walter Carrington's account of Alexander's life, the fullest yet published,* is only appropriate for the New World's first Alexander periodical!

Along with your manuscripts, we also invite your opinions about *The Alexandrian*. We will do our best to take them into account as we proceed.

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After working for a lifetime in this new field I am conscious that the knowledge gained is but a beginning, but I think I may confidently predict that those who are sufficiently interested in the findings I have recorded, and who will be guided by them in any further search, will find their outlook and understanding towards the question of the control of human reaction (behaviour) so completely changed that they will see that knowledge of the self is fundamental to all other knowledge, particularly to that which can make for the raising of the standard of human understanding and reaction essential to a sane plan of civilization.

—F. M. Alexander

What Does the Alexander Technique Mean to Me?

by Judith Leibowitz

Over my years of teaching the Alexander Technique, I find there are certain aspects I am stressing more and more. I know that much of what I say you have already heard, but maybe some of it will be heard with "new ears," or in the light of new experiences that you have had.

Essentially, the Alexander Technique is a method by which one can become aware of and change habit. Usually a person comes into the Alexander Technique because of a problem one has been unable to deal with. One studies a while, and perhaps learns to change or handle the situation, and may even discontinue studying. But one has now also opened the way to further change, and so may continue studying on his own. Change is a constant occurrence, yet not completely outside our realm of control. The excitement of the Alexander Technique is that one is offered a way to take over and control change to some extent—that one is given a means whereby one can deliberately and consciously make some choices. One doesn't have to be always conscious and aware and studying oneself—how boring! It is that learning to use this method gives one the possibility of choosing the next step—whatever it may be. Let me point out here that we don't know where we are going, we only know where we have been. And while much is learned or experienced on an unconscious and subliminal level, true control comes from conscious choice.

Now let us come back to defining the Alexander Technique. Simply, it is a method for changing habit. It is the ramifications of change that are so complicated and difficult and thrilling. To change a habit one must first know the habit to be changed. Then one must have a means to change, and a direction in which to go. And this study brings into sharper focus all sorts of awareness—kinesthetic, visual, intellectual, conceptual, sensory, tactile, philosophical, etc. One is dealing with the whole psycho-physical entity, and let us not forget the soul!

I think by now you have some insight into the means which bring about this constant growth, but I want to mention what is unique in the Alexander Technique. First, there is the inhibition of the habitual response—there is no way of experiencing the new until one has stopped the old. Then, there is the poise of the head on the spine which allows for the total lengthening of the spine in every movement and which facilitates the anti-gravity responses. And finally, conscious direction which defines the poise of the head and lengthening of the spine, and gives a tool for realizing these conditions.

Each teacher teaches out of his or her own background, special interests, and biases. I am eternally fascinated with the means offered by the Alexander Technique for exploring and developing the human potential. With each student I go on a never-ending, new, exciting, and thrilling voyage of discovery.

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Increased Volume of the Lungs After Alexander Training: A Pilot Study in Normal Adults

by John H. M. Austin, M.D.

The volume of the lungs appears to increase after Alexander training in normal, healthy, young adults, according to preliminary findings in an ongoing pilot study at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City. Vital capacity (how much air can be taken in in one very deep breath) and other tests of breathing are being assessed before and after a series of 20 lessons in the Alexander Technique. Most of the volunteers tested to date have shown a slight but definite increase in vital capacity.

Chest x-rays of the volunteers are also obtained before and after their 20 lessons, in order to assess the structural changes allowing the increased lung volumes. A potentially major structural difference under investigation is thoracic slouch, i.e., the extent of forward tilt of the thoracic spine. Other structural assessments include the distances from the tops of the lungs to the front and back ends of the diaphragm, and the distances across the chest between the clavicles and between corresponding ribs. X-ray measurements are known to correlate well with the vital capacity and other functional tests of breathing.

This pilot study is to be completed shortly on a total of 10 volunteers. If the final results confirm the initial findings, then it is hoped a further study can be performed on a larger number of subjects. To be acceptable in the scientific literature, a properly formal study will require control subjects, which are lacking in the pilot study. Controls may be of two kinds: subjects who have no training of any sort, and subjects who undergo an alternate form of physical education which might lead them to believe their pulmonary function would be enhanced.

Eventually, we hope similar studies may be performed on subjects with musculoskeletal abnormalities of the chest, such as scoliosis (sideways curve of the spine).^{*} It is also possible the Technique might prove helpful to persons suffering from chronic lung diseases, such as asthma or emphysema. For any therapeutic or preventative applications of the Technique to become accepted by the medical community, controlled scientific studies must be performed. We hope this pilot study may serve as a first step in that direction.

The study is under the supervision of Dr. John Austin, Associate Professor of Radiology, Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, 622 West 168th Street, New York, NY 10032.

^{*}See *Postural Management of Scoliosis in the Adolescent and Adult Based on the Alexander Technique* by Deborah Caplan, M.A., R.P.T., available from ACAT-NY @ 50¢.—Ed.

Habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs one step at a time.

—Mark Twain

There is such a connection between different parts of a vessel, that one rope can seldom be touched without altering another. You cannot stay a mast aft by the back stays, without slacking up the head stays, etc., etc.

—Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years Before the Mast*

We have modified our environment so radically that we must now modify ourselves in order to exist in this new environment.

—Norbert Wiener

A Note on Coghill¹

by Ron Dennis

For many years now, the work of G. E. Coghill has been cited to support that of Alexander.² It now appears, however, that some of Coghill's generalizations were premature, and that their use in support of the Alexander Technique should be modified.

Briefly, in his studies on the small lizard *Amblystoma punctatum*, Coghill established that innervation developed in a cephalo-caudal (head-tail) direction, and that limb movements emerged from a more general pattern of trunk movement. He then theorized that behavior developed as the expansion of a "total pattern," rather than simply as the combination or coordination of reflexes, and suggested strongly that this might well be true for higher vertebrates, including man.³ Considering Alexander's emphasis on the importance of the head-neck relationship and of dealing with the whole organism, it is easy to see how he readily took up Coghill's ideas in support of his own.

However, in *Aspects of Neural Ontogeny*, A. F. W. Hughes, Reader in Zoology, University of Bristol, summarizes several developments "... which have eroded the Coghillian dictum."⁴ According to Hughes, studies on the embryos of chicks, sheep, and even another species of lizard, show that both total movements and local reflexes can be elicited by stimulation, and that there is no predictable stage of generalized reactivity in Coghill's sense. For example, from a study on chicks:

Any part or combination of parts can be active, while other parts are temporarily quiescent, or all parts can move simultaneously, but out of phase with each other. Such a picture defies all of Coghill's concepts.⁵

Or, from a study on a related lizard, *Amblystoma mexicanum*:

There is no evidence for the existence of a 'total pattern' in these forms.⁶

It should be emphasized here that Coghill's conclusions regarding *Amblystoma punctatum* are not at issue, but rather their wholesale extension to other species. It may be that a total pattern does characterize the development of behavior in some species, and possibly in man; however, we apparently may no longer assume this on the basis of Coghill's work with *Amblystoma punctatum*. In the present writer's opinion, these developments in research as summarized by Hughes suggest caution in citing Coghill's work in support of the Alexander Technique.

¹Since writing this, I have learned that Dr. Wilfred Barlow has written on this topic and reached similar conclusions. See his "The Total Pattern of Behaviour," in *More Talk of Alexander*, Dr. Wilfred Barlow, ed. (London: Gollancz, 1978), pp. 240-245.

²Coghill's "Appreciation: The Educational Methods of F. Matthias Alexander" appeared in Alexander's *The Universal Constant in Living* (Dutton, 1941); a recent example is A. Rugg-Gunn, "Physiological Gradients" (*The Alexander Journal*, No. 8, Autumn 1978), pp. 26-32.

³*Anatomy and the Problem of Behaviour* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1929).

⁴London: Logos Press, 1968, pp. 165-170.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

Discoveries of any great moment in mathematics and other disciplines, once they are discovered, are seen to be extremely simple and obvious, and make everybody, including their discoverer, appear foolish for not having discovered them before.... To arrive at the simplest truth, as Newton knew and practised, requires years of contemplation. Not activity. Not reasoning. Not calculating. Not busy behavior of any kind. Not reading. Not talking. Not making an effort. Not thinking. Simply bearing in mind what it is one needs to know.

—G. Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form*

Lines for my Self

These are the directions
For right use
Of my Self:

As my awareness expands,
I wish my neck to be free!
My head to go forward and up!
My torso to lengthen and
My back to widen!

As I continue with *those* directions,
I wish my shoulders to extend
My ribcage to expand and contract,
As I breathe with my back!

Also, I wish my fingers
And arms to lengthen,
And my toes and legs
To lengthen!

All this, and more,
Will give me a free
And expanding self,
As I continue to allow

My neck to be free!
My head to go forward and up!
My torso to lengthen!
And back to go *back* and widen!

Goddard Binkley
February 12, 1978

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There are some men who are encumbered by very strange habits in their bodily bearing. When they hear something, they twist the head to one side in an odd way and tilt the chin upward, gaping with the mouth open as though they were going to hear with the mouth instead of with the ears. There are some who, when they go to speak, tap with their fingers either on their fingers or upon their breasts, or upon the breast of the person to whom they are speaking. Others can neither sit still, stand still, nor lie still without wagging their feet or else doing something with their hands. Some move their arms in rhythm with their speaking, as though they were swimming across a great body of water. . . . I do not say that all these improper practices are great sins in themselves, nor that all who do these things are great sinners. But I do say that if these improper and unrestrained practices dominate the character of the man who does them, to the extent that he cannot desist from them when he wishes to, then I say that they are signs of pride, of a curious mind, and of an unregulated display and desire for knowledge.

—Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 14th c.
(Ira Progoff, trans., Delta Books: New York, 1957)

F. M. Alexander: A Biographical Outline — Part I

Walter H. M. Carrington, Compiler

Frederick Matthias Alexander was born on January 20, 1869, at Wynyard, northwest Tasmania. He was the eldest of eight children.

His grandfather, Matthias, of Scottish descent, had married an English woman and settled on a large estate which included Table Cape and was bounded by the sea and the River Inglis. F.M.'s father, John, married the daughter of a local magistrate and jointly managed the estate with his three elder brothers.

F.M. was a weak and sickly child, although very precocious, and he was privately coached by the village schoolmaster. He spent much of his time out of doors observing animal life and nature in the virgin country around his home and in swimming, boating, and fishing. As his health improved from the age of eight or nine onwards, he devoted himself to horses; his love of them and his expert knowledge of their training and management remained with him all his life.

In 1885, at the age of sixteen, Alexander began work as a clerk with a nearby tin-mining company and studied accountancy in his spare time. From a child he had been interested in acting, elocution, and dramatic recitals which were in those days the principal form of entertainment both publicly and at private social functions. He had considerable natural aptitude as a performer and as a producer of amateur theatricals. Within three years, by doing sparetime work, he had saved enough to go to Melbourne for professional training.

Here he lived with an uncle and aunt while for six months he took lessons in elocution, dramatic art, and the violin from the best teachers. He also paid frequent visits to theatres, concerts, and art galleries, and formed his own amateur dramatic company. When his funds ran out, he took clerical and accountancy jobs, and also worked as a tea-taster, but with a recurrence of his early illness, his dislike of commercial life, and his at that time violent temper, he did not hold many of them for long. But he had now decided to make his career as a professional elocutionist and reciter, and again saved enough money for training and for a few months rest and recuperation.

Through his production of plays, his recitals, concerts and private engagements, Alexander was becoming well-known, and at the age of twenty-five he decided to return home and try a professional three-month tour of Tasmania. His mother gave him full support in his choice of a career, but his father was distressed that his eldest son should have become "a strolling player and a vagabond." He performed in Wynyard, Waratah, Launceston, and finally Hobart, with great success, and made arrangements through friends in New Zealand to open a tour there early in 1894.

Melbourne and Tasmanian critics had given Alexander good notices and his reception in New Zealand at the age of twenty-five was already assured. He had occasional brushes with individuals who took exception to his forthrightness in approaching problems, but on the other hand he made friends very easily, and professional colleagues and people in leading positions in the towns he visited went out of their way to befriend and help him. What no one could do anything about, however, was an increasing tendency for his throat to fail him towards the end of his recitals, no matter how much he had rested it before such occasions, as several doctors had advised. Nevertheless he continued his tour with five weeks in Christchurch, six weeks in Wellington, a month in Napier, and six months in Auckland. F.M. had for some time been watching himself closely in the mirror, trying to find out experimentally what it was that he *did* with himself which, he was convinced, led to his voice failure in

reciting. He was also carefully studying breathing methods and voice production work, because it had been pointed out to him that he was beginning to gasp for air at the end of a sentence. Diaphragmatic and costal breathing was then the fashion. F.M. tried and rejected this, and began to evolve his own method.

This, although not fully evolved, was already sufficiently revolutionary to attract much attention, especially among the amateurs in his audience who heard him recite. A number of them approached him privately to seek his help, and although he had never considered the possibility of teaching, he announced on the last night of his series of recitals in Auckland, his intention of giving lessons in voice production and breathing; within a few weeks he was taking pupils from nine o'clock in the morning until ten and eleven at night. After three months, he decided that he would teach in Australia because of family commitments (instead of going to America or elsewhere, as theatrical agents had proposed). He gave a farewell performance in Auckland before he sailed. A packed audience of pupils and the general public presented him with an hand-illuminated testimonial of appreciation, the signatures headed by that of the Mayor of Auckland.

Years later F.M., speaking of the development of his technique, said: "It was in Auckland during those last three months that I got the idea of what it really was — and could be." Although he had realised so soon that what he had to teach had a far wider significance than mere voice training, his friends in Melbourne when he took teaching rooms there were at a loss to understand what it was he hoped to be able to do. But after a few weeks of teaching singers and other performing artists, Alexander received for lessons the son of a local doctor. The boy was suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis. Shortly afterwards, the same doctor sent a woman patient with adhesions of the lungs. Another doctor, learning of the improvement in these pupils of Alexander, sent him a girl with spinal trouble. Soon the number of pupils who had been introduced as patients by their doctors exceeded the number of stage and theatrical people he was teaching. A theological college, on medical advice, asked Alexander to teach a group of nineteen students primarily for voice production, but as with his other pupils now, they were taught first the "use of the self." The use of the voice and manner of breathing followed as a part of this teaching. Doctors and professors of the medical faculty at Melbourne University were also among Alexander's pupils, and after two years in Melbourne he found himself well-established and with a wide range of pupils, both those who could be described as "normal," and those who had been diagnosed by doctors as suffering from some specific complaint.

After three more years, F.M.'s brother, A.R., joined him as a teacher, and he transferred his practice to Sydney. His reputation preceded him, and once again he was soon inundated with work. Dr. J. W. Steward McKay, a famous surgeon practising at Lewisham Hospital, gave Alexander particular encouragement when he found that his technique was of great value in gynaecological cases, frequently overcoming the necessity for an operation on a patient. It was Dr. McKay who, by his interest and understanding, confirmed Alexander in his belief that he had discovered something of a universal nature with great value to man; and it was he who persuaded F.M. to come to London in order to secure for his work the recognition that it merited.

Alexander had still by no means deserted his beloved theatre, and with a company composed almost entirely of pupils who had been sent to him as patients by their doctors, he presented *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice* in the Theatre Royal, one of Sydney's largest theatres. He then took his company on tour, giving thirty performances of each play before saying goodbye to Australia and sailing for London on April 13, 1904. He took with him the good wishes of some of Australia's most prominent citizens in the field of medicine, surgery, education, religion, government, judiciary, and the stage; and he carried letters of introduction to Sir Arbuthnot Lane, Sir Herman Weber, Sir Sinclair Thomson, Sir Crisp English,

Dr. Scanes Spicer, Dr. Percy Jakins, Mr. Mansell Moulin, Sir George Alexander, and Sir Arthur Mee.

For six years F.M. lived and taught at rooms in the Army and Navy Mansions, Victoria Street, until he moved in 1910 to his last address at 16 Ashley Place, London SW1. Few of those to whom he brought letters of introduction were of much help to him, although Sir Crisp English, Dr. Percy Jakins, and particularly Dr. Scanes Spicer, sent him many patients for lessons in the technique. Other doctors also worked with Alexander, but in those early years in London it was the theatrical profession which made his name as a teacher.*

By 1910, when Alexander had had to bring in both his brother A.R., and one of his sisters to assist with his ever-growing number of pupils, it also became necessary to attempt to put the principles of his work into print in order to forestall some would-be plagiarists who were jealous of his success. The task proved then, as it has ever since, to be formidable, if not impossible. But *Man's Supreme Inheritance* was eventually ready, and constant demand kept it in print throughout the subsequent forty-five years of his life.

One of the many influential people who endeavoured from time to time to put Alexander's work on an official footing, was Sir Archibald Murray, Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the outbreak of World War I, who tried without success to have the technique embodied in Army training. The war led to an immediate falling off of the number of pupils, and F.M. decided to go to America. He knew that, unless he could teach continuously, he would lose the skill of his hands, the continuing development of his awareness and sensitivity, and the stimulus of having daily to solve new and different problems, each demanding its own particular approach. He sailed for New York in the *Lusitania* in the first month of the war, and before the end of September had more pupils than he could handle. When he landed, he knew only two people in the United States, but his contacts snowballed by personal recommendations of his teaching.

Before he returned to London in May, 1915—the first of his many war-time trips through the U-boat blockade—F.M. had laid the foundations of what was to become, within ten years, an enormous practice. Every year from 1914 to 1924 (except in 1921), he crossed the Atlantic westwards around October, and returned home to Britain in the spring. An assistant teacher, Miss Ethel Webb, had joined him from London during his first visit to America to help in the work, and his brother A.R. relieved him there when he came home. In subsequent years another assistant teacher, Miss Irene Tasker, joined F.M. in the States, and the two teams maintained a year-round teaching practice until 1924.†

In 1920, Alexander married an Australian, Edith Page, and in 1924 bought a house and twenty acres at Bexley, Kent which was his home until the death of his wife in 1937. They adopted a daughter, Peggy.

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*His pupils included Lily Brayton, Oscar Asche, Harry (H.B.) and Sir Henryk Irving, Lady Tree and later Viola Tree, Sarah Brooke, Matheson Lang, Norah Kerin, Jimmy Welsh, Robert Loraine, Alice Crawford, Lewis Waller, and Beerbohm Tree. Others whom F.M. recalled from his earlier days include Lady Wenlock, Lady Castlereagh, Lord Astor, Lord Worsley, Lady Louisa Walker, Sir Clement Hill, Sir George Doughty, Reginald McKenna, Robert Hay (Bishop of Winchester) and his brother John, the Rev. William Pennyman, Miss Lucy Silcox, Esther Lawrence of the Froebel Institute, Sir Hugo Cunliffe Owen, and Thomas Gracey.

†Among Alexander's pupils in the early years (listed as accurately as the passage of time allows) in New York were Professor John Dewey, Professor Bush, Professor Hodge, Professor H.M. Kallan, James Harvey Robinson, John F. Waterbury, Mrs. and Miss Harriman, Amos Pinchot, John J. Chapman and Mrs. Chapman (nee Astor), J.B. Duke, Dr. J.H. Jowett, Mr. Waldo Frank, and Mr. Arthur Reis.