

In memory of Walter Carrington who died on August 7th, 2005

When I first joined the training course at Lansdowne Road, London in 1973, I was struck by Walter's calm and kind demeanor and the sense that here was a man with great depth of knowledge of this mysterious subject, the Alexander Technique. I was in such a personal state of turmoil at the time that I was not even really aware of his mastery as a teacher of the Technique, but the hours of training each day were an oasis of order and tranquility in my otherwise disordered life.

As I went on through the training, and then worked as an assistant teacher for many years at Lansdowne Road, I came to value and appreciate more and more, along with his immense skill in teaching, those personal qualities,. So much so that when a visitor once said to me at the end of a day in class "I'd love to know what lies behind that mask of benevolence," I could only answer: "I've been around him five days a week for more than ten years and I really believe that behind that mask of benevolence there lies a truly benevolent man."

That word benevolence inevitably comes up when anyone who knew Walter talks about him. It was used in the caption under his photo in the obituary in the Times. Benevolence is an attitude of positive goodwill towards everyone. It seemed to go with an attitude of self-acceptance and contentedness in his own life. I once asked him if that came from a lifetime of putting the Alexander Technique into practice. He laughed heartily, and then replied: "Well, I don't know what else it could be!" At times, standing near him as he gave turns on the training course, this quality was almost palpable, radiating from him like a personal energy field.

One day while giving me a turn in class, Walter repeated a saying he'd heard somewhere: "They say all wise men are of the same religion. But what that religion is, no wise man will ever tell you." In religious traditions that wonderful quality of acceptance and benevolence that Walter conveyed to everyone might be called impersonal love. I know that after abandoning his early interest in joining the Jesuits, Walter did not espouse any religion. But under the purview of any religion, or none, impersonal love is a remarkably high aspiration and attainment.

Of course, this quality also enhanced the mastery of his hands. Through the repeated experience of his hands I came to understand that in order to change you must be able to accept how you are as your starting point, and feeling that you are accepted is a great aid in that process. Often in the two minute turns that he would give all of us, teachers and students alike, each afternoon, I would feel as his hands first came onto me an immediate amplification of my own sense of myself. My deep underlying pattern of use would come more clearly into my consciousness. And yet there was also an underlying feeling tone of "It's OK to be who you are." Or, as I often heard Walter say: "If you've become aware that you're stiffening and pulling yourself down, the first thing to do is say to yourself, well, that's the way it is." Of course, paradoxically, it then became possible to consider that changing would be OK too. In this way Walter conveyed to us that acceptance and self-acceptance are crucial to the practice of inhibition and direction.

I have at times heard Walter say that late on in FM's life, he realized that people took in far less of the content of what he said than the manner in which he said it, plus of course the quality of the experience they were getting from his hands. Sometime in my second year of training, I had a vivid experience of how that might have been. As Walter gave me a turn one day in class, working with his hands on my lower ribs, my breathing suddenly became uncontrollable shudders, and deeply held distress burst out of me in the form of both sobbing and hysterical laughter. Incipient panic was dispelled by Walter's powerful yet gentle hands supporting me, and the totally accepting and reassuring way in which he repeatedly said, "It's the diaphragm, John. It's just the diaphragm." Looking back I think he could have said absolutely anything at that moment. What counted was not the words, but the message of quietly benign acceptance conveyed from every aspect of his being.

Some years later, when I was teaching at Lansdowne Road and was consulted by the producer of a planned British TV documentary on the Alexander Technique, I took him to interview Walter expecting he would feature Walter in the film. The producer later decided to feature another first generation teacher instead, and I conveyed this news somewhat apologetically to Walter. His response was very characteristic: "Good Heavens, don't worry about that. You know I'm not in the least bit concerned about such things." And he wasn't. Part of what made him a wonderful teacher was that he really, really didn't concern himself with being seen as a wonderful teacher. You knew he was working to help you, not to impress you. This was also apparent in his generosity in answering questions. Some master teachers in many fields succumb a little to the temptation to hold back something, to create an aura of mystique that enhances their personal power. I never saw a trace of that in Walter. The more able you became to articulate precise questions about teaching, the more fully and freely he would share his knowledge and experience.

In 1988 when I was living and working in Melbourne, Australia, Walter and Dilys came to visit. We arranged for Walter to deliver a public lecture on F.M. Alexander at Melbourne University. Since Melbourne was the birthplace of the Alexander Technique, an audience of several hundred people turned out to hear about this work that had originated in their city. Walter delivered a fine talk, portraying both something of the character of FM and the nature of his discoveries. We teachers were sitting there feeling very pleased with how the event was going, when someone got up from the audience and began fervently speaking about their own experience of a visit to Lansdowne Road in London, and their own views about the Alexander Technique. These views were somewhat eccentric, not really what those of us teaching in Melbourne would have wanted a large gathering of our fellow citizens to hear as a first impression of the Technique. We were embarrassed. We wanted this person to sit down and stop talking.

Walter sat on the platform listening with that same aura of calm acceptance and goodwill that he brought to all of his life. It appeared he did not allow a molecule of discomfort or disapproval to enter his being. When the intervening speaker had finished he thanked her with genuine graciousness for her contribution. A last question was allowed from the

audience, and Walter was challenged to demonstrate rising from a chair with good use. He beamed at the questioner as he sat and talked about how awkward such a question might be, and how it made him aware of all the possibilities of being nervous with so many people watching him being put to the test in this very public arena. And then he rose lightly and easily to his feet with an open-faced, open-hearted smile.

The Dean of Melbourne University, who had never met Walter before this evening, closed proceedings by telling the audience that tonight we had enjoyed the privilege of having the life and work of one great man described to us by another great man.

Thank you, Walter.