, It's a Growth Process!
John Nicholls

John and Ruth used Zoom while John was on the Isle of Man and Ruth in Devon, England, on July 31, 2017.

Ruth: How did you initially hear about the Alexander Technique? Did you have any physical problems at the time?

John: The sequence was something like this: I felt I was a psychological mess. I was a mass of anxiety, neurosis, and tension. I started going to meditation groups, which made me acutely aware that I was also physically very tense, and it eventually dawned on me that, just possibly, there might—*might* be—some connection between these two things, a psychophysical connection maybe? [He laughs]. I started doing yoga, tai chi, Bioenergetics,[1] and God knows what else. And frankly, none of it was helping very much.

Ruth: How did the Alexander Technique come to your attention?

John: I read about it. Then I had some lessons.

Ruth: Did someone suggest you read about it or did you just find a book someplace?

John: I first came across it reading novels by Aldous Huxley[2] when I was around seventeen. I noticed that, as well as the novels, Huxley had written a philosophical book called *Ends and Means*, so I got hold of a second-hand copy of that. There's a passage in it that's much quoted by Alexander Technique teachers.[3] He wrote only one long paragraph about the Technique, but I was very intrigued. This was before the internet existed, and I was living on this small island, the Isle of Man, getting books out of the local public library. *Ends and Means* was written in the 1930s, and I encountered it in the early 1960s. I had no resources to pursue the Technique any further, and I assumed that it was something they were doing in the 1920s and '30s and it had probably died out.

I also had developed an interest in Eastern thought including Hindu and Buddhist philosophy that was sparked by E. M. Forster's novel *Passage to India*, which I had to read for school. Then when I was living in London in the late '60s, I was into all the growth movement stuff. I started exploring both Eastern thought and the newly-arrived techniques from California—eclectic bodywork, encounter groups, Gestalt—all this came straight from Esalen[4] across to London. At one of those places, I saw a little hand-written announcement on the notice board that said,

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[1] Bioenergetic Analysis is a body-centered psychotherapy founded by Alexander Lowen (1910–2008) and rooted in the work of Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957).

[2] Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) was an English writer and philosopher who studied with F. M. Alexander. A character in his novel, *Eyeless in Gaza*, is modeled after Alexander. Huxley described the Alexander Technique in *Ends and Means*. See note 3.

[3] Aldous Huxley, "Education," chap. 12 in *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937), 258–9. "So far as I am aware, the only system of physical education which fulfils all these conditions is the system developed by F. M. Alexander. Mr. Alexander has given...a technique of inhibition, working on the physical level to prevent the body from slipping back, under the influence of greedy 'end-gaining,' into its old habits of mal-co-ordination…. We cannot ask more from any system of physical education; nor, if we seriously desire to alter human beings in a desirable direction, can we ask any less."

[4] The Esalen Institute is a retreat center founded in the 1960s in Big Sur, California, that has focused on the human potential movement.

"Friday evening, 7 p.m., Lecture-Demo on the Alexander Technique." And I thought, *Oh my God, it's still alive!*

Ruth: What year was that?

John: It must have been about 1970, '71, something like that.

Ruth: You attended that lecture, right? What do you remember about it?

John: It was terrible. Really bad. Later I got to know the teacher; we became quite friendly. She was a good teacher and a very nice person, but that was the first time she'd ever given any kind of public talk. She came round and put hands on us briefly, and I didn't really feel anything, but I was intrigued nonetheless. I thought, *Ah! There's more to this.* And I found that there was an Alexander center on a road called Lansdowne Road, which is in the Holland Park area of London, very near to where I was living. I was a ten-minute walk from Number 18 Lansdowne Road! I started having lessons.

Ruth: Many teachers recognize "Lansdowne Road" as the place where the Carringtons lived and ran the Constructive Teaching Centre until their deaths (Walter in 2005, Dilys in 2009). That was such a big house, how did the Carringtons acquire it?

John: It was earlier called the "Lady Isobel Crips Center." It had actually originally been owned by a teacher called Charles Neil. The money to purchase it came from the trust set up by a well-known British politician, Sir Stafford Crips, and his wife, Isobel.[5] Charles died young, and Walter and Dilys were able to buy the house.

Ruth: Did you have your first lessons with Walter?

John: Yes. I've told this story at various public gatherings before as to how kinesthetically obtuse I was. I had my first lesson with Walter and I didn't feel a thing, but I was still intrigued. And then I had lessons from some of the assistant teachers there at that time. By about the fifteenth lesson, I remember saying to the teacher, "I know I don't seem to be making much progress with this, but I've decided I'm going to keep having a lesson a week for a year, to give it a good try."

Ruth: Oh, bravo.

John: I continued, and, after the seventeenth lesson, I was walking down the street from Holland Park towards Notting Hill Gate. I had this extraordinary feeling that I was kind of lifting up. I remember thinking to myself, *So this is it! When they say "going up," it's real!! It's not just a piece of jargon!* And about half an hour later, I, rather vividly and correspondingly, had this experience of everything dragging down. And I thought, *Oh, this is what they call "pulling down."* So I was in! It took me seventeen lessons.

Ruth: Did you get through the whole year of lessons before you chose to start training?

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[5] Stafford Cripps (1889–1952) and Isobel Cripps (1911–1952) studied with F. M. Alexander and became avid supporters of the Technique. However, when FM refused to accept their offer to support a society that would ensure the future of the Technique, the Crippses eventually turned their attention to Charles Neil, a former pupil of Alexander, who combined physical therapy with the Technique. First called the "Re-Education Centre, it was relaunched as the "Dame Isobel Cripps Centre." (See Michael Bloch, *F.M.: The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander* (London: Little, Brown, 2004).

John: I'd had over a year of lessons and was well hooked by then. That's when I went to a London public library and got hold of FM's books, which I thought were cumbersome and boring—and possibly still do. They didn't speak to me very much at that time. Then Maisel's collection came out, and I got a hold of that.[6] That was better edited and packaged; it was easier to get something out of that. And I was not happy in the work I was doing and had already been thinking that I didn't want to spend my life doing it.

Ruth: What was that?

John: I had fallen almost accidentally into commercial computer programming, which I was very bad at, and then sidestepped into technical writing—you know, computer manuals. I was very good at telling people how to do stuff even if I couldn't do it so well myself, so I guess I was a ideally suited to becoming a teacher. [He smiles.]

Ruth: Your pre-Alexander experience really fits into how well you verbally articulate instructions as you teach.

John: People have asked me, "Is it your Oxford education that's made you very good at explaining things so clearly?" And I've always said, "No, writing computer manuals taught me to explain things clearly. Oxford never taught me anything useful!"

Training and Assisting on Lansdowne Road

Ruth: I've always been curious about how it came about that you assisted Walter and Dilys at the Constructive Teaching Centre for eleven years. Did you ask them? Did they ask you?

John: Well, certainly you didn't do things like ask for that. No, no, no. I must have been very fortunate. Dilys took a great interest in another trainee, Margaret Edis, and me, and Dilys, with Walter's agreement, had both of us start teaching about six months before we qualified. I remember just before the Christmas and New Year's break—so near the end of '75, Dilys said, "Now, you and Margaret are not going to progress any further until you start teaching; it's time you both got some real experience, and we think you're ready to work. I've got a couple of nice young students going to come along in early January for you both." So, there you go.

Ruth: Were you already putting hands on other fellow-trainees without the supervision of Walter, Dilys, or another teacher?

John: Oh yes, by the third year of the training, you were free to do that, yes.

Ruth: It sounds as if it was unusual during your training for a final-term trainee to start teaching. When I went through training, we were encouraged to start putting hands on the public outside of class time during our final year, although for little or no fee.

John: I felt that my training gave me, fundamentally, a terrific grounding, as I trained for three years and then assisted the Carringtons every day for eleven years more. But there were a few things, which, in the modern world, needed to be added. One of the really key things was that

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[6] Edward Maisel (1917–2008) was a writer on music, tai chi, and the Alexander Technique who compiled the chapters and wrote the introduction to *The Resurrection of the Body*, (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1969), a book of selections from Alexander's writings that appeared at a time when Alexander's works were not widely available.

there was *no* preparation for teaching. There was no easing you into starting to give lessons, no discussing how to become more articulate about how we talked about and presented the Technique, no help in learning how to get free of jargon and be able to re-word and re-phrase things according to who you were talking to, and so on. There was no system of supervised teaching in your final term or two. You were just left to say, at some point, "Would it be okay if I gave a turn to a friend of mine?" It was all very casual. So it was unusual to have one of the Carringtons say, "We are going to start you teaching."

I think it was a few months later, before I'd even qualified, when I was planning on leaving London and moving up north to Manchester, because I thought that would be a good place to get an Alexander practice going, that Dilys simply said to me, "Walter and I have been thinking about this, and we'd really like you to stay on. We'd like to have a male teacher around the place." At the time the only assistant teacher regularly giving lessons there was Mary Holland. I simply got asked and, you know, that was the offer you couldn't refuse.

There were lots of rooms for giving private lessons. The deal for Mary Holland and me and then later for people who joined us, such as Andrea Beasley and Meredith Page, was that we got paid a very small amount for teaching on the training course, but we had free use of the teaching rooms, and people were referred to us. Walter and Dilys were very much in demand for lessons, Walter especially, so I got a lot of overflow, and actually by April of 1976, before I qualified in July, I remember giving six lessons a day. That included some of their students that Margaret and I took when Walter and Dilys went away on vacation.

Ruth: Did people become specific students of Walter, Dilys, Mary Holland, or John Nicholls, or was there a general fluidity so whoever was available to teach would give a lesson?

John: There was not exactly fluidity. When a new person came along and they weren't specifically asking for Walter or Dilys, they'd be given to one of us assistants. Generally, they just stayed with that teacher. And, of course, over time you built up your own clientele by word of mouth recommendations from those you were already seeing, and these new people would ask for you by name. One reads about how it actually played out in the first generation at Ashley Place, that you could turn up, and you never knew which of the assistant teachers you were going to get.[7] We didn't do that; it didn't seem a very good educative process.

There were pupils who had been coming to Walter for years, and he was getting too busy, so they would sometimes be passed on to one of us assistants. Some of those people had actually started with FM, so by being there, in Lansdowne Road, I actually gave lessons to people who'd had lessons with FM and the other early teachers and who had continued with Walter. They found it quite fun and interesting to be passed on to be one of us newer teachers of the next generation.

Ruth: Did you pick their brains about FM?

John: I did. What stays in my memory is that, quite commonly, they said, "I felt wonderful in lessons with FM, but I didn't really understand any of it until I went to Walter or some of the other assistant teachers." That was the most common thing that I heard.

Influential Teachers

Ruth: Obviously Walter influenced you in a very primary and essential way. Who else influenced you?

[7] See Eva Webb, "Diary of My Lessons in the Alexander Technique, 1947" in *The Philosopher's Stone,* ed. Jean Fischer (London: Mouritz, 1998), 15–35.

John: I couldn't be happier to pay great tribute to Dilys Carrington. I learned more from Walter than anyone else, but after that it would be Dilys. She was so kind. I think I was very fortunate to know her and to get on well with her at a time when she'd really come into full-time teaching after having raised three sons. And she had *enthusiasm.* She was *learning* on the job and would share with me and a few others who were there at the time. "John, let me show what I've just found today about when you do this in this way and then you undo here." That pleasure and enthusiasm rubbed off as she shared these experiences from her own development.

She and I began talking to each other about something we would both notice around the same time, such as really getting the hang of this "widening through the shoulders and through the upper body," or the undoing to the elbows in the hands on back and chair directions, or "You have to have this going when you put your hands on people." And then we both began to realize what was completely missing was anything lower down!

I remember Dilys saying to me, "Do you know, when I'm giving turns to training-course students, I've realized I'm stiffening my legs approximately every twenty seconds." And I sort of noticed in myself that I had all this stuff opening up in the upper part of the body, and my version of knees "forward and away" was, as you might say, pure lip service. You know, it was just, "and knees forward and away." It was very helpful to be going along with Dilys in that discovery and recognition that *Oh my, you've got to undo your legs just as much as your arms, if it's really going to work properly*. And that fed into everything I did later on, really.

As people who were training at Lansdowne Road around that time will remember, Dilys used to get that happening in students by putting fingers in the crease of the front of the hip and the crease of the back of the knee and saying, "ask for length between these two." I couldn't get it that way to anything like the degree she could, but I found it worked also if I put a hand on the sacrum area and said something like "release the thighs forward from here through the back of the knees, but stay back with the hand on your back."

Peggy Williams gave wonderful hands-on experiences but didn't explain very much, but I learned one crucial thing from her: I was overly manipulative, doing too much with my hands, and Peggy rather scathingly said to me, "Any fool can pull people about. It's keeping them *connected* that's the real skill." I was a bit miffed and was privately thinking, *Why does she keep using words like "connection" and "connected"? What the heck does it mean? She never explains what it means.* A year or two later, I started to actually get the *feeling* experience when working on people of what she was getting at—what it meant when you started to feel that an arm wasn't just an arm, but you were actually connecting to the whole sheet of back musculature through the arm. I remember I said to her then, "So how *do* you keep people connected?" And, again, with a rather scathing tone, as if, you know, *What an idiot you are to ask it,* she said, "By staying connected in yourself, of course!" That was very valuable.

I would add one other person from whom I had one great learning experience, and that was a woman living now in Sydney, Australia: Christine Ackers, known as Kri. She'd qualified with Walter many years before me and was coming in several days a week to assist on the Carrington training course, and I was a teacher of about a year's experience at that point. She was helping me put my hands on somebody one day, insisting on more and more undoing in my arms, more undoing than I had ever dreamed was possible. It got to the point that I said, "But Kri, now my hands feel completely useless." And she said to me, "That's when you're about ready to do some useful work!" Now, that was an eye-opener.

Luckily enough, being in London at that time, I could also get lessons from Marjory Barlow, Margaret Goldie, and a couple of lessons with each of Pat Macdonald, John Skinner, and Peter Scott. It was a great time. You could see all these people, and you could talk to them at meetings, and so on. The things I've mentioned are the things that stand out as key learning. And there were teachers trained by FM teaching us in the class: Peggy Williams and Sidney Holland were there

several days a week, Irene Tasker used to visit, as did the Walkers, Tony Spawforth and Goddard Binkley, who wrote *The Expanding Self*.[8]

Different Continents, Different Students

Ruth: Let's turn to teaching in Australia and to training on many different continents and in different countries. How did it come about that you went to Melbourne to open a training course?

John: Ten years after I started assisting them, Walter and Dilys were really encouraging me to think about starting a training course. They just didn't think I was going to do it on the other side of the world; they thought I was going to do it in London! [He laughs.]

There was already a training course in Sydney, Australia. Melbourne and Sydney are historically twin-rival cities and the thinking over there was, "We'd like to open a course in Melbourne as well, but we don't have anybody with the necessary years of experience to become an authorized training course director." I remember a letter arrived one morning from Australia, and it said, "We hear you've been thinking of starting a training course, and we hear you might even be thinking of leaving London" (because London was too expensive). And then it said, "If you're thinking of leaving London, would you consider coming to Melbourne?"

Ruth: Just a hop, skip, and a jump away!

John: It immediately seemed like an amazing opportunity! The projected timeline would have meant our daughter, our only child at that time, would be one and a half years old when we began in Australia, and at four and a half, she would still be under school age at the end of a three-year training cycle, which would fit well if we chose to return to the United Kingdom then. Carolyn, my first wife, had about four or five years of teaching experience when we planned to leave for Australia, so we asked the STAT Council, and they agreed to give her the authority of a co-director, which was helpful in dealing with a team of experienced assistant teachers in Melbourne.

Ruth: How did it go? What was different about being in Australia?

John: In the way of teaching, surprisingly little. I remember being told by an Australian teacher—who had himself had a fairly orthodox training in London but then become very keen on Marj Barstow, application work, and group teaching—that I would soon realize that if I arrived in Australia and did that "old-fashioned British kind of stuff," it wouldn't succeed there. But I found that if you did that supposedly "old fashioned stuff" very well, and if you were articulate about how you presented things, then you could do just fine. By the end of the second year, as well as running the large training course, I had a very full private practice.

Before leaving for Australia, I had already worked out how I wanted to structure the training course as a basically Carrington-type process. Dilys had worked out this very good structured program for taking people through hands-on development in the first year, but the second year, instead of having a structured program, suddenly became somewhat haphazard. I wanted to develop a well-planned structure that would carry through the three years and further extend that way of gradually, step-by-step, developing the building blocks of how you learn hands-on skills. And I wanted to take what Walter called "games"—I preferred to say "directed activities"—and give them a bit more structure by really trying to think of a *sequence* of directed activities. So for several consecutive days or a whole week or more, there would be a theme that would illustrate some particular aspect of the Technique, either helping you to understand it in your own use or helping you to understand it as something you could teach other people, and so on. I also wanted

[8] Goddard Binkley, *The Expanding Self* (London: STAT Books, 1993).

to organize the talks with a bit more of a learning sequence, so to speak. I thought more about what books people needed to read, what articles, what bits of scientific information would be helpful, and so on.

The big thing in Melbourne was that we *deliberately* started with a large group and took no one else during the three years. We had the documents that would make it possible to stay longer than three years if we wished to, but we had no idea whether we would want to. We wanted to be free to leave without anyone being halfway through training. We took twenty-four people at the beginning; two dropped out during the program, so we graduated twenty-two.

Ruth: Twenty-four is a huge number for a training course, especially the first time round and for them to be all at the same training level.

John: In all my years assisting Walter and Dilys, their course had twenty or more trainees in it, so I was used to that number of trainees. It was a fascinating experience to take a group of people through the three years with no new people starting, especially with that size. We devoted the third year to developing the transition into being a teacher. That worked *so well* that I seriously thought that's what we should keep doing in the future.

We were lucky in that we had a big space. We rented half a floor of an office building and had five rooms for private lessons and a large space full of light for the class. In the last few months of the course, we had volunteers coming in three days a week and trainees practicing on them with assistant teachers helping. Then we would all talk about it afterwards. It was a great way to do it.

Ruth: Why did you leave Australia?

John: I remember saying to some friends at the time that I could think of twenty reasons to stay in Australia and twenty-one to leave. It was a terribly difficult decision. For the first few months after returning to England, I really thought that it was the wrong decision. I love Australia, Melbourne especially, and am fortunate I can go back there every year—my brother and his family are there and I made some good friends there. The biggest negative factor was feeling a long way away from all the other parts of the world with which we had any connection. The nearest neighboring countries are Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. The parts of the world with which I had linguistic, socio-historical, cultural connections or family and friends were on the other side of the globe.

Ruth: You don't count New Zealand?

John: Whoops, I don't want to offend any New Zealanders**!** At the time I was living in Australia, I had no opportunity to visit New Zealand and knew very little about it. On more recent visits, I've come to enjoy very much going to New Zealand and been able to travel around a bit to appreciate its outstanding natural beauty, but it's even smaller than Australia in population. I mean, Australia is a small number of people on a *huge* land mass. New Zealand has an even smaller number of people on a still pretty-big land mass.

Training Course in the United Kingdom

Ruth: When you arrived back in England in 1990, did you take time to transition before you went to Brighton?

John: Only about nine months.

Ruth: Did you teach at Lansdowne Road during that period?

John: I did. Walter and Dilys asked me to, so I taught there from perhaps January through July and started up in Brighton in September 1990.

Ruth: Did you assist on the training course in London as well as give private lessons in the same way you had before going to Australia?

John: I probably didn't give private lessons there at that point, because the rooms were occupied by the next generation of regular assistant teachers. I think I gave lessons from home. But after moving to Brighton, I was allowed to continue to use a room at Lansdowne Road to give private lessons two afternoons a week (coming up by train from Brighton) until I left for New York at the end of 2002.

Ruth: Did you structure your course in Brighton in the same way as in Melbourne?

John: It was immediately apparent that there were so many other training courses in the United Kingdom that if someone came along and we said, "The entry's closed now, we've just started a three-year cycle, come back in three years' time," then they would say, "I like what you do, but I don't like it enough to wait three years! There are other places I can go." So we went back to the regular system. Over the years, I've come to the conclusion that the regular roll-on-roll-off at any time system has just enough advantages to give it a slight edge over the all-in-one packaged cycle. By "edge" I mean that I've observed trainees gain a tremendous amount of informal learning from those ahead and behind them. They watch the development of those ahead and practice on those at an earlier stage. I think that is very valuable.

How Does One's Teaching Improve?

Ruth: Did you become a better Alexander Technique teacher and also a better training course director just by virtue of continuing to teach?

John: Well, it's got to be not just practice but *intelligent* practice: conscious, intelligent practice. As a training course director, for example, I had to have the curiosity and willingness to consider what was working and what wasn't working turn by turn, month by month, year by year. You know, thinking, *This part of the hands-on progression is not going as well as I thought it would. What if we tried it this way?* Same with the directed activities and the reading. You can't just start the engine and let it run down the track; you get better by reflecting on it, questioning, and tinkering.

It's the same with private teaching. Having your hands on a very wide range of people gives you a better *feel* for it. But you've got to be conscious of what didn't go well. And you are gradually working on your own use, which feeds in, because your own use is a primary tool in conveying information to the student. So you also get better at that from the practice you put into your daily life. And I read an awful lot of Alexander-related stuff that feeds into how I give verbal explanations, presentations about the Technique, and so on.

Ruth: You used that alarm-raising word *feeling*. Many Alexander Technique teachers are instructed, because of Alexander's writings, not to rely on feeling, or at least not until our sensory appreciation has been vastly re-educated. Is there a progression, a time when you began to rely on feeling?

John: I've come to consider that the Alexander Technique and teaching it is, for something seemingly all about thinking, remarkably about feeling. I'll talk more about that later, but for now I'd like to point out that what FM called "faulty sensory appreciation" or "debauched kinesthesia"

is a very significant problem for most people when they begin to have lessons—we're all familiar with that condition—but that doesn't mean you're supposed to ignore all proprioceptive information for the rest of your life!

Generational and Cultural Differences

Ruth: Would you say that, over the decades that you've taught, people are changing in their needs? Are people more slumped, more end-gaining, less something else?

John: Honestly, I can't say I've really noticed that. When I began teaching in the mid-1970s, the trend already was established towards more collapsed postural attitudes rather than stiffly held ones. But I've noticed cultural differences in the United Kingdom, Australia, and America.

Ruth: Such as?

John: Well, Australians are, of course, different from the English. Possibly Australians are more similar to Americans**.**

Ruth: In what way?

John: More direct, more outgoing, more egalitarian. I was challenged a lot more, in a good way, in Australia, by training course students, other teachers, and by people in audiences. One evening a month we would offer a free introduction to the Alexander Technique at what we called the Melbourne Alexander Training Centre, and I really came to enjoy all those challenging questions. They had no specter of tradition; they'd just bounce up with their questions. It was a wonderful learning experience. Maybe it prepared me for America. [He jokes.] Luckily, I discovered that I enjoyed it.

The training didn't change; the way I interacted with people, the way I talked about the Technique, evolved. I mean, hah!—it was that initial shock in Australia, that you ask for a volunteer, and, you know, six or eight people race to the front, whereas in England, I was used to asking for a volunteer, and nobody moves. Later, back in London and giving a public presentation of some kind, I remember commenting to somebody afterwards about the seeming unresponsiveness of the audience compared to what I'd become accustomed to in Australia. (To be fair, those attitudes have been changing in England in the past twenty-five years or so.) So, I got used to these different cultural responses, I suppose. In recent times, after living and working in the United States for over thirteen years, the way I talk about the work has probably become even more fluid. In the United States, in recent years, I also became more direct in pointing out aspects of misuse in people I was teaching as they expected that kind of directness, whereas in the United Kingdom, one might come at it more indirectly.

The Technique Becomes Part of Who You Are

Ruth: I am curious about how you are using the Technique for yourself. Has that changed as you've aged or as you've taught all these years?

John: I think the biggest change is that I don't feel like I'm "using" the Alexander Technique. It just becomes part of who you are. I mean, I was sitting having lunch in a local café earlier today, and, noticing a sense of discomfort, realized *Oh, I'm pulling down there,* and then I could simply come up with release and direction. I don't think, *Gosh, Alexander Technique.* I don't think *Stop.* I don't think *Say no.* I'm just aware I want to come up out of this! That's part of why I said earlier that for something seeming to be all about thinking, it's remarkably about feeling.

I heard many of the first-generation teachers I was around in my early days in London say that you would develop your own alert system—something triggering you to notice you were

pulling down—and what's that "something" going to be if it's not a feeling? You can't go around checking yourself in mirrors all the time. There are many places in FM's books where he says things like:

> By this procedure a gradual improvement will be brought about in the pupil's sensory appreciation, so that he will become more and more aware of faults in his habitual manner of using himself; correspondingly, as with this increasing awareness the manner of his use of himself improves, his sensory appreciation will further improve, and in time constitute a standard *within the self* by means of which he will become increasingly aware both of faults and of improvement, not only in the manner of his use, but also in the standard of his functioning generally.[9]

As a matter of fact several years ago I looked quickly through FM's books and other writing and collected nearly three pages of quotes from these sources where he repeats this same kind of thing. I have these in PDF electronic form and will happily send a copy to anyone who e-mails me to ask for it.[10]

So I'm almost tempted to say that at times it's more like "it uses me," rather than "I use it." I don't really experience myself as a person who "uses" the Alexander Technique.

Ruth: Was that different when you were first training and when you were in your early years of teaching?

John: Oh yes, of course it was very different! I was consciously, at times, choosing to apply the Alexander Technique and, at times, completely unconscious of it. Then I would think, *Gosh, I better get back to thinking about that Alexander Technique stuff.* It's just become so much more fluid and so much more part of me that "it" has become non-linear.

Ruth: You're *living* the Alexander Technique**.**

John: Well, it just does become part of you. There's a fine sentence or two in a talk that Walter gave, and he might even have given it in Melbourne when he visited there in 1988, where he says that the orders or directions become part of what you wish for, part of what you want in life. I think that's a pretty good statement. If you get up and go across the room to get a book that's on the table on the other side of the room, you could say that you have one main conscious priority: *I want to get that book.* Your nervous system has a second level of priorities; the main one is, *I don't want to bump into anything on the way, and I don't want to fall over onto the ground on the way*. Then you begin to feed into that priority system the conscious wish, along with not bumping into anything and not actually falling over, *I'd like to manage it in such a way that I'm not pulling my head down into my body, not fixing my ribs, and not scrunching my back.* You really are programming your nervous system, adding these basic Alexander considerations into your hierarchy of priorities. Eventually, they're just *there*.

I also want to make it clear that we're not talking about perfection. This has nothing to do with perfection: None of us is ever going to be perfect, and it's super important that people understand that. You can have those priorities glued into you and still have a lazy day. I'm often a very lazy Alexandrian—when I say these inhibitions/directions are in my hierarchy of priorities, that doesn't necessarily mean they are high up there all the time; there are days or hours or minutes when I pay less attention to them than at other times. But I'd have to admit that at those

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[9] F. M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (London: Orion Books, 2001), 68–69. The quoted material is in italics, and that in roman was originally in italics.

[10] jnichollsat@gmail.com.

times I know I'm being lazy, but the desire to be lazy creeps higher up in the priority chain for a little while. Conscious laziness as a choice! (He is smiling.)

Inhibition and Direction

Ruth: How has your conception of inhibition developed from the time you were first introduced to it until now?

John: I suppose I initially imbibed a certain amount about saying no, about stopping, and about not reacting. But I did notice during the training that there was more fluidity in inhibition in the way Walter spoke about it and acted himself. Slowly, partly from conversations and just being around him and partly, gradually, looking at my own experience, it became clearer and clearer to me that there are three ways in which people use the term *inhibition*. They have overlapping meanings in the Alexander world, and that causes a lot of confusion.

Inhibition one is "Stop and say no," and, of course, it's very, very helpful in many life situations to say, "Whoa, wait a minute! Don't do that; stop and think." That's not a specific Alexandrian thing. How many people's parents have said, "Why don't you just stop and think?!" In fact, I'm surprised sometimes at how many teachers don't seem to realize that there's a vast world of psychological and spiritual disciplines that all hold in high esteem the practice of trying to be less reactive—that's nothing special to us.

Which brings us to *Inhibition two*. Where there's something a bit special is linking inhibition with the process of direction. We have this wonderful process of asking the neck to release, to let the head go out, etc. Is that inhibition or direction? If I'm asking my head to go forward and up, that's a direction. If I'm refraining from pulling it back and down, that's inhibition. I think that as you go from stopping to moving into action, there is a level at which *Inhibition two* is the reverse side of direction. It's simply a matter of whether you choose to express it as a negative or a positive. When FM, in some of his writing seems to say inhibition is the cornerstone,[11] I think it has to be taken in both meaning one and meaning two, where directions are a form of inhibition, otherwise *Inhibition one*, while super valuable, is not at all unique to us. But when it's linked to *Inhibition two,* we have something special, a more precise tool, which leads us to *Inhibition three*.

Inhibition three might more accurately be called *Inhibition zero,* because it precedes one and two. This is what Margaret Goldie emphasized in private lessons. She would talk of choosing to be quiet, of allowing quiet, of stopping in order to be quiet. During one lesson, she quoted FM to me as having said "Choose to be quiet with particular attention to your neck and head."

I've heard Walter speak about not allowing the instructions to inhibit and direct to add to the habitual voices already going on in your head. He would say that inhibition and direction should be helping to quieten these voices, not add another one to the cacophony already going on in there. You don't want your inhibiting and directing to be *another voice* adding to the voices that are already chattering inside your head, another voice saying *Stop, stop, say no, say no, neck free, head forward and up,* increasing the internal noise! At that level of brain quieting, it's very akin to meditative processes.

I went to some of Krishnamurti's[12] talks at Brockwood Park when I lived in London, and I remember him saying something similar to what Walter said, that you don't want meditation to be a process of one part of your mind telling the other parts *Shut up because I'm trying to meditate.*

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[11] F. M. Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living*, (London: Mouritz, 2000), 83. "The reader will now see that the technique is based upon the inhibition of the habitual wrong use—i.e., the refusal to react to a stimulus in the usual way—and that the principle of prevention is strictly adhered to from the beginning."

[12] Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was an Indian writer, philosopher, and speaker who addressed psychological revolution, the nature of mind, meditation, inquiry, human relationships, and bringing about radical change in society.

It gradually becomes apparent that for there to be any kind of successful inhibition in meanings one and two, you're going have to quiet down.

Ruth: Many teachers would say that the unique aspect of the Alexander Technique is inhibition, Am I hearing you say, "Yes, but only if you consider *Inhibition two*, linking inhibition to direction."?

John: I'm saying, only if you use the term *inhibition* in a broad sense that encompasses all the three aspects just described. And it gets more complex, because these things are reciprocal or circular. Stopping or taking time allows a chance to quieten down and direct, and getting a little bit of undoing in the neck, back, and ribs may well enable you to quieten down a bit more, which will in turn enable you to consider more calmly what might be the best course of action, etc. The subjective experience is usually that all these things can reinforce each other.

Ruth: Earlier you said you can simply come up "with release and direction." What words do you use to direct?

John: None. [He laughs.]

Ruth: None…. When did you stop using words? Did you ever use words?

John: What I was taught from the very beginning was that a teacher communicates to you in words as well as with the hands. The teacher had to use the word "neck," the word "free," and the word "head," but I wasn't taught that I was supposed to repeat those words in my mind, subvocally. I wasn't taught to do that, ever.

Ruth: Wow. Is that pretty universal for the Carrington training, that you never heard any teacher instruct a trainee to practice those words? And you never give any private pupil those words to say to themselves?

John: Well, I certainly never told my private students to say those words to themselves. Walter never told me to say those words to myself. I can't swear that some other assistant teacher might—the point I want to make is that Walter was quite *explicit* about saying, "It's not about repeating words." He was quite explicit about that, perhaps because when I joined the training course in 1973, Dr. Barlow's book, *The Alexander Principle*,[13] had just been published in the United Kingdom. In it Dr. Barlow described the Technique as a form of conditioning in which you silently repeat the words of the orders or directions, and they become associated, by conditioned learning in the lessons, with the experiences from the teacher's hands. Because the book came out just about the time I began training, Walter particularly wanted to get that point across: He didn't want us to repeat words silently to ourselves. He even mentioned that, in his experience, FM was also opposed to the idea that learning to direct was a process of conditioned association; FM had come across it because behavioral conditioning theory was strong in the 1950s. You can see it wouldn't fit well with the man (FM) who wrote, in capitals "…THE CONSCIOUS MIND MUST BE QUICKENED."[14] And I think quickening the conscious mind must include sharpening our conscious awareness of kinesthetic or proprioceptive signals, as the earlier quote from FM on improving sensory appreciation illustrates.

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[13] Wilfred Barlow, *The Alexander Principle* (London: Gollancz, 1973).

[14] F. M. Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (London: Mouritz, 1996), 33.

I don't want to give the impression that Walter was denigrating the whole idea of giving directions. He taught us to direct, and, of course, you have to speak words to people to communicate, but I think from early on it was communicated to me that the words are pointers to the experience we're aiming at. As we speak at this moment, I feel a little constriction around the back and sides of my neck. So I can take a moment to just ask myself to lighten up out of that. It didn't require a word of any sort. There was a kinesthetic signal, a warning bell of discomfort, and then that combination of release with intention that we call "direction." This was something else I very much learned from Walter: that there had to be muscular release but always including the direction you wanted the release to go in, otherwise gravity will just take all release into a downward collapse. Adding a directional intention to any release ensures that we get a redistribution of muscle tone, not a vague letting go of tension. Undoing of unnecessary tension—with appropriate lively tone for postural support—is "going up."

Borrowing a term from the horse riding world, Walter sometimes referred to this as "elastic bracing," but not "rigid bracing." So direction is muscular release with a directed spatial intention—terms like "wish," "aim," and "intention" work well. I often find myself saying to students, "Just keep this in mind as a quiet wish or intention." Or using a word Dilys often used: "Ask" for it to happen. But it doesn't require repeating words in your head, as that simply adds to the noise. When you are teaching, of course you have to speak words to communicate with your students, but you are using the words to help them learn how to frame these wishes for themselves in an effective way, not simply to repeat your words to themselves.

Here's a long quote from Walter on this subject, taken from a master class he gave at the International Congress in Jerusalem in 1996. He's talking about getting up that morning and considering what he has to do that day:

> *And then you think "Oh yes, this is Friday morning, and I've got to go up there to room 503 for that class." Well, as soon as you have registered that in your mind, you didn't have to say all the time, as you were getting up and getting dressed, "I've got to get upstairs to 503, I've got to get upstairs to 503." You didn't have to go on repeating that. Because the intention was there in your mind. So when the hour came you duly went.*
>
> *Now, certainly, words are a very important tool, a very important reminder. You cannot remind yourself too often of the importance of your neck being free, of your head going forward and up. But it is the wish, the intent, the real intention, that is the essential thing. If you do not have the intent, the words are useless.*[15]

And in FM's Bedford College Lecture he says: "…give the directions or orders for these means whereby, in the form of a wish, as it were, and keep that wish going all through the activity."[16]

Developing in Daily Life

Ruth: You've described many discoveries that you made while teaching or developing your training courses. What about when you were not teaching?

John: Luckily, it just seemed fairly clear from the beginning that this way of using yourself in teaching surely was going to have to be how you used yourself in daily life as well. I remember Dilys saying to me that to get better contact of your hands on another person, I should practice by

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[15] Walter Carrington, "Master Class" in *An Evolution of the Alexander Technique, Selected Writings*, ed. Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Sheildrake Press, 2017), 80.

[16] F. M. Alexander, "Bedford Physical Training College Lecture," chap. 24 in *Articles and Lectures* (London: Mouritz, 1995), 168.

picking up and holding objects around the house. I think it was fairly clear all the way through from the beginning of my training that this had to be done, that there wasn't a certain way of using yourself to teach that was separate from using yourself in daily life. So that process continues, you know, *Can I get it with more undoing through the neck, shoulders, arms, and legs, while staying supported through the spine? Am I letting my ribs move to breathe?* Whatever you're doing.

Breathing is so important—freeing the thorax, gaining thoracic mobility. I find that when I sit at the computer, a great indicator that it's time to get up and take a break is when I notice my ribs aren't moving anymore. I'm either stuck in so much mental concentration that I'm barely breathing, or I've physically sunk into myself so that I'm compressing the thorax. I actually think that observation of the movement of breathing is the royal road to kinesthetic awareness. If you notice the movements of breathing frequently, it leads you on to noticing areas of tension or collapse elsewhere in the body that are compromising the freedom of the ribs, including, of course, your neck. FM wrote that "…all 'physical' tension tends to cause thoracic (chest) rigidity and breathlessness (lack of respiratory control)…."[17]

Ruth: Do you lie down?

John: I lie down every day, sometimes more than once a day. I find it wonderful. It's endlessly reviving and refreshing.

Ruth: Do you try to come to *Inhibition zero* as you lie down? Or do you let you mind wander? Or does it depend?

John: It's not mind wandering. When I learned Buddhist mindfulness meditation, we learned to come back to the present by using the awareness of the abdominal movement of breathing or the air on the upper lip as an anchor when we got swept away with thoughts, and then to simply observe the passing procession of thoughts and feelings. In an Alexander sense, the anchor is your felt sense of yourself with your back on the floor and with an additional element of directional intention—asking your head to be able to release out, while having an awareness of rib movement to allow the back to widen, to release into more contact with the floor, and to release the four limbs out from the back.

I've often given lessons to Buddhist meditation teachers, and we've had conversations about this. There was a group in Brighton called Friends of the Western Buddhist Order—they've changed their name to something else now.[18] The conversations often included questions like: "Is it enough just to be present and consciously aware?" They would initially equate Alexander lying down with a mindfulness meditation practice, which, to a degree, it is, but with an extra element: that along with being present, allowing the flow of sensations, thoughts, and feelings—but not being swamped by them, not being taken into unconsciousness by them—there's something else, which is direction. There has to be this other subtle element: *I, quietly, would like to undo in the directions that give me overall expansion*. It's a quiet background intention or aspiration. That's how I see it.

Preparing to Teach and the First Hands-on Moment

Ruth: Let's talk about right before you start the first lesson of the day, or perhaps the first part of the training day. Do you have a routine to prepare yourself? Are there certain things that you physically or mentally do in anticipation?

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[17] F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (London: Mouritz, 2004), 127.

[18] This Buddhist group, founded in 1967 in the United Kingdom by Sangharakshita, is now called the Triratna Buddhist Community.

John: If I have complete control over my environment, I'll give myself ten or fifteen minutes to lie down before the first lesson of the day. With less time, I find some of the basic movements, what have come to be called "procedures," very enlivening. I might do a little bit of monkey; I find going up on the toes very enlivening; on the toes in monkey is wonderfully invigorating for your back and for your breathing. I might do variations of Hands on Back of Chair. I also find consciously extending my outbreaths very helpful—this can be via whispered "ah's," or it can simply be choosing to have longer quiet outbreaths through the nose and allowing the consequent greater elastic recoil of ribs and diaphragm for the in-breath. They're all simply great ways of warming up. But if there isn't time, I just walk into the lesson and remind myself that the way I'm going to use myself in the lesson really shouldn't be different.

I used to think that if you got a good experience with a good teacher's help when doing something like Hands on Back of Chair while in a monkey that that's how you were supposed to *be*. I realize now that you can't possibly be like that all the time, but it took years to understand that. We're always on a gradient or a continuum, and these practices that FM figured out are really ways of revving it up to the maximum. That's why they're great warm-up processes. You learn from that kinesthetic experience, but don't beat yourself up if you don't feel at that high point all the time.

Ruth: Right. So in that first moment when the hand is on the student, is there a way to break it down? What happens next? Where is your awareness? Is it on yourself, on the student, or does it fluctuate?

John: I don't think that there is a way to break it down, because what's so crucial about it is it isn't break-down-able. I don't want to sound overly pretentious or whatever about it. I just try to put into practice what I learned from Walter and Dilys, above all from Walter.

I'm directing for myself while I feel what's happening in myself and in the student. My own direction opens me up to allow a more sensitive connection to the student, a kind of two-way kinesthetic communication. I'm *not*, from my brain, directing for the student. I've heard some people say, "I put my hands on Bill, Mary, John Doe—whomever—and I'm thinking, *My neck to release, Bill's neck to release; my head to go forward and up, now Bill's head to go forward and up, my shoulders widen and Mary's shoulders widen.* That isn't how I was trained to teach. Again in one of the talks in *Thinking Aloud*, Walter says,

> *…to get effective results, the teacher has got to focus the primary thought on himself or herself and not on the student. At the same time as focusing the thought on yourself, you want to feel as much about the pupil as you possibly can. All the sensory channels must be wide open and focused on the pupil. You are thinking about yourself and feeling about the pupil.*[19]

Ruth: And yet, your hands might invite someone to have the shoulders widening.

John: Exactly. My hands respond to what I feel, where I feel that compression, that squeezing, that self-limiting process going on with the student. I can—using my hands, coming from my back and from my contact with the ground—invite the student to come out of that, along with appropriate verbal guidance so they gradually learn how to inhibit and direct that for themselves.

If you work like that for long periods, and if there is a connection to the other person—there's that word Peggy used—then you are *connected* through yourself from your contact with the floor,

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[19] Walter Carrington, "The Importance of a Teacher's Use" in *Thinking Aloud*, ed. Jerry Sontag (San Francisco, Mornum Time Press, 1994), 99.

stimulating the up through your whole body, which somehow flows through to the student. I have to use these vague words, because I'm trying to describe an experience that is tactile, kinesthetic, but also subjective and psychological as well. You put your hands on, connect through the floor and connect to the student. I notice if *I'm* gripping somewhere, and I notice if something's going on in the student. I might not be accurate enough to say, "Gosh, you're gripping in your left ankle." But I'd be accurate enough to say, "Can you undo a bit more through your legs, onto the ground," and so on.

Noticing me or noticing them, it doesn't seem to require a shift of attention. I mean, you just know. Frank Pierce Jones talked about this, a kind of unified field of consciousness.[20] It's not something I've worked at; it does just happen. The more you open up, which is an entire psychophysical attitude expressed through that openness to the ground via the legs and feet undoing—no longer trying to "do" the task of postural support—and the arms and hands undoing—no longer anxious to "do" something to the student in front of you—the more it happens spontaneously and becomes the norm, really. You open up to being a channel for cooperative communication with the student. I think this is why, when Walter was giving me a lesson or a turn, I felt he was cooperating with me in helping me go where I wanted to go, not "doing something" to me. His hands could be active, elastically firm, but seemed to evoke the change from inside of me, not impose it from the outside. I loved that and wanted to learn how to work like that. It also seems to me as I go on with it that being an open channel allows your individuality, your uniqueness, to come through more and more clearly so there's no need to assert your individuality by trying to invent your own "special" way of teaching.

Fear

Ruth: Has there ever been any element of fear in putting hands on, perhaps a concern that you're not giving the student what he or she needs?

John: For at least the first few months of teaching, there was nothing *but* fear. I remember I was literally trembling when I gave the first lesson to that young student. It was fear, fear, fear, from beginning to end.

Ruth: Wow.

John: In fact, I might add this, because it might comfort anybody who's going through that themselves: That first student took about six or eight lessons and said she wasn't getting anything from it, so she was stopping. It was pretty disastrous—I was pretty badly hit by that. It was an awful beginning. Luckily, a couple more people came along. And then I had an invitation to teach two evenings a week at a house shared communally by a group of people. That's when I started to get confidence, because they seemed to really get something from it.

I could not myself feel the changes in the student for about the first year of teaching. I was relying on the fact that I could see some changes, and they told me they felt better, and they kept on paying me money so I believed them. [He laughs.]

Ruth: You must know how heartwarming it is to hear that there were times when you struggled, that you weren't hatched an expert teacher.

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[20] Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change* (originally *Body Awareness in Action*) (London: Mouritz, 1997), 170–171. "The observer is stationed where, instead of looking out upon his environment or in upon himself, he is looking *through* in such a way that the continuity between organism and environment appears unbroken."

John: Oh God, no! [He laughs.] I'd really love to communicate that. I mean, I've said to trainees and in workshops "If I could do it, anybody could do it!" You know? I'll tell you something else Dilys said about me. She said, "When you started training, Walter and I thought that you weren't very promising material." I was *so* kinesthetically insensitive. Even after I had begun teaching, it took a *long* time.

Ruth: This is reminding me of "Anyone can do what I do, *if* they will do what I did."[21]

John: Just keep quietly asking to open up in this way. Yes, if I could get there, one would have to be pretty terrible not to.

Exchanging

Ruth: Did you spend time exchanging with other teachers when you first graduated?

John: When I began teaching, yes. I was so lucky to be at Lansdowne Road, where there were other teachers. We would informally, spontaneously, exchange if we were hanging about in the big training room waiting for the next private student. You know, one of us might be lying on the table, the other could give a turn, or somebody might say, "Oh please, come take my head; I'm really feeling in need." Or some days Dilys used to breeze in and spontaneously put a hand on one or two of us just for a couple of minutes while talking to us about something. It was a privileged environment to work in.

Ruth: Oh, nice. And as the years went on?

John: Later I also had opportunities to put hands on Dilys, and even on Walter occasionally, later on, and Peggy. That was all very valuable experience.

Ruth: Would they give you feedback as you put hands on them?

John: Yes, definitely, which was very helpful and very encouraging to feel, *Gosh, maybe I'm on the right track; or at least I'm not too badly on the wrong track*.

Ruth: As you moved from country to country, did you continue exchanging?

John: That varied according to who was around. Exchanging is a very sensitive thing, you know, you've got to get along with the other person and trust them. That's been an on-and-off thing, depending on where I have lived. In my last years in New York, I had a close friend, a colleague I could exchange with, which was very enjoyable.

Feeling Older

Ruth: You have recently returned to your hometown on the Isle of Man after having most recently lived in New York.

John: Yes, I went from living in New York with nearly ten million people to living in a town with barely ten thousand people on an island with eighty-five thousand people.

Ruth: How has that adjustment been for you?

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[21] F. M. Alexander as quoted by Fr. Geoffrey Curtis, "The Alexander Principle and some Spiritual Disciplines in *More Talk of Alexander,* ed. Wilfred Barlow (London: Gollancz, 1978), 154.

John: It's working out very well, because it's an easy, comfortable, and rather beautiful base where I have close family connections. From this base, I travel to teach in many different parts of the world. People living here sometimes say the island is a great place to live provided you can get away frequently, and I'm very fortunate that indeed I can!

Ruth: You're in your 70s now. In most other professions, people have retired by your age.[22] But you know, we Alexander Technique teachers—excuse the irony—don't seem to want to stop. Are there ways that you feel you are aging, slowing down, or transitioning?

John: Oh yes. You only have to look in the mirror to know that you're aging, for heaven's sake! Apart from that, I feel a little slower, I've put on some weight…. We could say less hair, less pace, and more waist! (He smiles.)

I always loved London and New York, the buzz of the big cities, and I still do. But the last time I was in New York, I spent a lot of time around the Flatiron district, and there's hardly anybody over the age of thirty-five in that neighborhood! I began to feel, *This is so frenetic, I don't think I could cope with this on a permanent basis any longer.* I used to think, *Gosh, why do people say New York is so fast?* Now I go there and think, *Wow, maybe it is fast!*

Ruth: Your pace of speech is never rushed. I was wondering if you perceive yourself as speaking more slowly than you did as a younger man?

John: I don't think I'm speaking more slowly than I did as a younger Alexander Technique teacher. As a teenager, I would take part in debates at school, and I was a good speaker. So, I think it's just something I've always been quite good at—speaking in whole sentences, very clearly, and so on.

Ruth: Are there other things you are noticing about aging?

John: I'm reminded of a composer and professor of music in London; when I gave him lessons, he was slightly younger than I am now; I think he was probably only mid-sixties. He rather plaintively said to me, "Inside, I'm still in my early thirties." Inside *I* don't feel seventy-two in many ways, not "in spirit," but I'm aware of limitations now. There are walks I like to do here on the Isle of Man, and, in particular, walks over the headlands around the bays in the south of the island. I've been doing those walks, gosh, since I was in my late teens, or early twenties. It is noticeable now that I either can't go as far or that there are some paths where there are some pretty steep uphill bits, and I find myself stopping, not once, but maybe two or three times, to get my breath back as I go up the steep grade. It's clear that I don't have the same strength, stamina, etc.

Ruth: Do these changes in strength or stamina affect how you teach? Do you choose not to do something because you're a little tired?

John: I'm no longer teaching every day. I didn't plan it that way, but it's ended up that way. Many of the people you've interviewed will probably have an ongoing teaching practice and/or training course. They might choose as they get older—as Walter did, for example—to just do less every day, to not teach as many lessons, or to let someone else go into the training course and lead it one or more days a week. But I haven't been able to make those choices.

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[22] Although there has been an increase in the labor force of people older than retirement age, in 2015 the percentage was still very low, 14% for workers 75 years old in 2015. See Salim Furth, http://dailysignal.com/2015/03/21/what-percent-of-75-year-olds-are-still-working/.

There are weeks and even a month or two when I barely teach at all. Then I teach extensively in intensive bursts, and that works surprisingly well for my energy metabolism. I might be six weeks in Australia and New Zealand, four or five weeks in the United States or South America, a week in Spain, a week in Holland, or a week in Belgium. I teach a week in northern Italy twice a year and occasional weeks in London. When I'm doing that kind of thing, I'm working intensively, as hard as I ever worked. I might give nine, ten, even eleven lessons a day. I might spend a morning with a training class and give five or even six lessons in the afternoon. I give weekend workshops and maybe a lesson or two after the workshop is over. I'm still able to do that, but I'm glad that there's a finite end point, when I go back to the Isle of Man and lie low. I'll also use that down time to do some writing, like blog posts on my website about the Alexander Technique and teaching it.

Ruth: What advice do you have for those of us coming after you who are already seniors or who will eventual reach that age?

John: Ruth, on the subject of aging, I have no advice whatsoever. I'm aware that I'm closer to the end than the beginning. I'm very grateful and very fortunate that I have no specific health issues and don't need to take any medications; I'm still pretty lively. I hope I've got a long way to go yet with the process. But I'm not inclined to give anybody advice about aging, because I think it's such an individual journey that everyone undertakes sooner or later. They have to figure it out for themselves in their own specific circumstances.

The Alexander Technique and Emotional Reactivity

Ruth: How does the Alexander Technique relate to emotional reactivity, in your experience?

John: This is a great question. Let's hope we've matured a little bit with age, that we're a tiny bit wiser than when we were at twenty-two, though it's difficult to know what changes in your emotional patterns come just from age, what comes from the Alexander Technique, what comes from other sources. I've had great help from good psychotherapy. My whole view of the Technique has evolved from what I now see as the very head-centered view—almost like the title of FM's book, *Constructive Conscious of the Individual*. The Technique very easily can be interpreted as *I am going to become this conscious being who lives here, up in my head. And from up here, I give directions for my body to move around the world, and as long as I stay in this stratosphere, at this level of my conscious reason, I will not be shaken by emotional gusts.* FM used that term, "emotional gusts."[23] You see, if you're in the stratosphere, you're not buffeted by the winds of emotional gusts.

But it gradually became apparent to me through life experience: that ain't going to work. [He laughs.] And so I've had a number of psychotherapists in my life, some in England, some in New York, and I've been lucky to have a couple of really remarkable ones who have been enormously helpful: Ian Gordon-Brown in London, and David Tannenbaum in New York. Ian was head of

[23] Alexander attributes "emotional gusts" to John Dewey and then uses it several times in his writing. See F. M. Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (London: Mouritz, 2004), 77–78. "In other words, the value of knowledge lies in our power to make use of it in association with the greater knowledge which should come to us as we increase in years of experience, and as we substitute reasoning for instinct and for what Professor Dewey calls 'emotional gusts.'" See also p. 144: "The processes of this form of re-education demand that the 'means whereby' to any 'end' must be reasoned out, not on a specific but on a general basis, and with the continued use of these processes of reasoning, uncontrolled impulses and 'emotional gusts' will gradually cease to dominate, and will ultimately be dominated. The organism will not then be called upon to satisfy those."

something called the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology,[24] and this gave me a link with a somewhat Jungian approach to, at its core, a sense of life as an open-ended growth process that you can learn to cooperate with more consciously.

Jung regarded going wrong, making mistakes in life, as a spur to consciousness. I find this approach very necessary to apply to the Technique, rather than that attitude that comes across from some books about the Technique and some teachers: "You're doing all these *bad* things, bad habits! So *stop* doing all these *bad* things and then you'll return to an original state of childhood perfection!" I find that so depressing! *I've spent my life trying to stop these bad habits, and I'm still not perfect.* You know? *I'm a failure.* But if we turn that around, the Technique is a wonderful tool for helping—it's a human potential tool, helping a growth process to flower, to unfold, to become, and so on.

I want the Technique to be so much more forward-looking instead of "Stop these awful bad habits and go back to your original perfection." That point of view is linked with the theory that we're all born with a set of inbuilt reflexes for perfect use and we just have to stop interfering with them, but see the work of Dr. Timothy Cacciatore and the presentations he gives with Dr. Patrick Johnson for how that theory is no longer scientifically tenable.[25] Development is a learning process, and learning can be adaptive or maladaptive.

Ruth: Would you say that the Alexander Technique fails you in that it's not positive enough as it was delivered to you?

John: No, I don't want to say that. I think, had it been delivered to me in that entirely negative way I've just described, then I might have been tempted to say that I felt it lacked. But I must say that Walter and Dilys didn't deliver it to me that way. I'm just aware there's so much of that around in the Alexander Technique world, particularly when connected with the reflex theory. I never experienced from Walter this negative "bad, bad, bad" stuff. It was always positive, forward moving, encouraging. He was, perhaps, not so explicit about it, though later in life he did sometimes suggest asking ourselves on waking each morning, "What am I becoming today?"[26] I also remember him saying on one occasion, when asked about FM's philosophy of life, that it was somewhat like that of Teilhard De Chardin[27] but without the Catholicism, and that is a very forward-looking, growth-oriented philosophy

It is interesting that in the early '80s in London, there was a big movement in the psychotherapy world towards Esalen Institute-type humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Then something new came into London that was called Psychosynthesis, an approach developed by Roberto Assagioli[28] in Italy, and it quickly became quite an influence in London. It had a strong Jungian orientation and was a very transpersonal growth-development-human potential-

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[24] Ian Gordon-Brown (1925–1996) together with Barbara Somers (b. 1929) founded the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology in 1973. Transpersonal psychology is a psychological perspective that integrates the spiritual and transcendent aspects of the human experience with the framework of modern psychology.

[25] Drs. Cacciatore and Johnson have offered their presentations to various groups, sometimes through Skype. For an example of goals and curriculum, see www.constructiveteachingcentre.com/events/science.

[26] Walter Carrington, "Walter's 'oneliners'" in *Remembering Walter Carrington*, Elizabeth Langford, ed. (Leuven, Belgium: Alexandertechniek Centrum, 2006), 144.

[27] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) was a Jesuit priest, paleontologist, and geologist born in France. He took part in the discovery of Peking Man. His posthumously published book *The Phenomenon of Man* expresses a teleological view of evolution. As Wikipedia says "He interprets complexity as the axis of evolution of matter into a geosphere, a biosphere, into consciousness (in man), and then to supreme consciousness (the Omega Point.)." wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Teilhard_de_Chardin.

[28] Robert Assagioli (1888–1974) trained as a psychiatrist and then become involved in the humanistic and transpersonal psychology movements. He subsequently founded, around 1911, psychosynthesis, a psychological approach that aims to integrate or synthesize the personality.

oriented therapy. Actually, Ian Gordon-Brown, the therapist I mentioned, trained in Italy with Assagioli, and Assagioli had been influenced by the esoteric teachings of Alice Bailey,[29] who came out of the Theosophical movement,[30] so adding a "spiritual" dimension.

I mention this because there were two main centers for Psychosynthesis in London. Leading figures, teachers, and therapists at both centers were very keen on the Alexander Technique. They would come to Lansdowne Road or to other teaching studios in London, and they would invite us to attend talks at their place. They also invited Walter one evening to talk and demonstrate the Alexander Technique to a large audience, so he brought a number of us along to give turns after the talk. It was lovely to feel that we were part of a community of people at the physical, psychological, and spiritual level. Walter, and those around him, were attuned to that growth-potential way of looking at things, rather than what I now think of as the "myth of the perfect child." All children do not have perfect use, as Alexander Technique teachers who are parents know.

Ruth: Do you have a wish for other Alexander Technique teachers based on your humanistic Alexander journey?

John: The linear model of the Technique—you encounter a stimulus, you stop and say no to your habitual reaction, you take time to give your directions, and reconsider how to act—of course, there are many situations in life where that works. And it will always be a valuable thing to practice. But what I really would like to get across is something I was trying to talk about when I gave that AmSAT keynote address.[31]

I find the word "attitude" such a wonderful word now, encompassing all levels from the most physical to the near transcendent. The Technique changes your psychophysical attitude, or attitudes—it's just experientially clearer and clearer to me that reactions come from underlying psychophysical attitudes. This might even fit better with the discoveries of modern neuroscience.[32] As you go deeper and deeper into the Technique, it's as if you get more in touch with those attitudes.

It's helpful if you have an ongoing aspiration—that's another of my "A" words—a yearning towards expansiveness rather than pulling down, aspiring to become a more open channel. Pulling down is a self-isolating process. You *can* pull down and interact with people, but I do feel there's something—when the psychotherapists or the Buddhists talk about too much ego—there's something about pulling down that is armoring your shell. Even at the simple physical level, "doing," in the sense of allowing use of the arms and legs to overwhelm the central postural support system of neck and back, signifies an ego anxiously asserting its separateness from the life stream.

The aspiration—to try to move towards an up and out openness in life, an allowing and accepting rather than resisting and controlling or passively collapsing—is a different attitude. Working on the Technique changes your attitudes, and in the end, that is what changes your reactions. I think that's how it operates, rather than, *I've developed this conscious reason, and from this conscious reason, I am making conscious choices about everything.*" Jung would have said that trying to control everything consciously is a recipe for madness. The idea that you can

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[29] Alice Bailey (1880–1949) was an English writer on theosophy and esoteric thought, and she was one of the first to use the term *New Age.*

[30] Theosophy originated in 1875 with H. P. Blavatsky as founder. It is a collection of philosophies for people interested in an occult and mystical explanation of the origins of the universe.

[31] John Nicholls, "The 'A' List: An Adventure in Perspective," AmSAT ACGM Keynote speech, 2014. See *AmSAT Journal* no. 6, Fall 2014, 48–53.

[32] Susan Pockett, William P. Banks, and Shaun Gallagher, eds., *Does Consciousness Cause Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). See particularly the chapter by Shaun Gallagher.

consciously control everything is actually a bit crazy-making. But you can consciously channel your aims, aspirations, values, and priorities, and eventually—I've used these words before, I think in the keynote address—you seem more porous to the world.[33] You feel like more part of the life stream, somehow, more of a cooperative channel that it flows through. I think that is a great benefit. And it's probably a benefit particularly as we age.

Biography

John Nicholls was born March 22, 1945, on the Isle of Man. After graduating from Oxford University, he moved to London and worked as a computer programmer and then technical writer. After reading about the Alexander Technique and later attending a lecture demonstration, John took his first lesson with Walter Carrington in 1971. He trained at the Constructive Teaching Centre, qualifying in 1976 and then stayed on as faculty through 1986. While still in London, John undertook counseling training at the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology in London from 1984 to 1986. John has directed several teacher training schools: the Melbourne Alexander Teacher Training School, Australia (1987–1990); the Brighton Alexander Teacher Training School, England (1990–2002); the Alexander Technique New York City, USA (2004–2014); and the John Nicholls Alexander Training (2014–2015). In 2016 John returned to his hometown Ramsey on the Isle of Man. Seán Carey's lengthy interview with John , *The Alexander Technique, In Conversation with John Nicholls and Seán Carey*, was published in book form in 1991. John gave the STAT F.M. Alexander Memorial Lecture in 1986, the AmSAT F. M. Alexander Memorial address in 2004, and the AmSAT Keynote speech in 2014. He has published many articles in various Alexander publications, and has taught, lectured, and led workshops all over the world, which he continues to do. See www.johnnichollsat.com, which includes a calendar of teaching commitments and a blog with sporadic thoughts about the Alexander Technique and teaching it.

Photograph by Jiyang Chen.

[33] John Nicholls, "The 'A" List," 52. "This constant turning yourself inside out, I think, slowly makes you a little more porous, a little more transparent. It actually does thin the walls, the barriers between inside and outside."