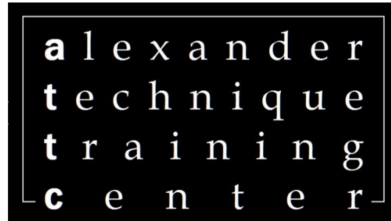


Primary Passages

by Ruth Kilroy

FM Alexander Memorial Address

2022



Hello everyone,

It's a pleasure and an honor to deliver this year's Memorial Lecture. I would like to open by paying tribute to a very dear friend and colleague who we lost this year - **Suzanne Faulkner**. Suzanne loved the Alexander Technique and never tired in her search to deepen her understanding of it, even when she knew that her time here was short. She was a joy and an inspiration and she is so deeply missed.



Preparing remarks for the Memorial Lecture turned my thoughts inward. How did I get here? I realized that how I grew up had a great deal of influence on my journey to and with the Alexander Technique.

Kibbutz Ma'abarot

Founded 1933

The only cooperative kibbutz left in the Hefer Valley.

Located on the banks of the **Alexander** Stream Nature Reserve.



I grew up in unique circumstances: I was the youngest child born to two Jewish German orphans who had lost their parents during the Holocaust, and found themselves making a life on a kibbutz in Israel.

The socialist rules that were the way of life on the kibbutz required that on the day my mother came back from the hospital where she gave birth to me, I was handed directly over to the children's house. I grew up there alongside my friends. Not once did I sleep under the same roof as my parents or siblings - though I saw them everyday. We grew up in a collective, **wearing** more or less the same things, **doing** more or less the same things. And we **absolutely** loved it.

There were 16 of us in our children's house. So you can imagine that there wasn't much room for individuality or privacy.

In my teenage years, I began to take dance classes and there I found my expression as an individual. As long as I fulfilled my community obligations and kept up my studies, I was allowed to take more dance classes and continue my self exploration via dance.

During this period, I began to feel a nagging sense in the back of my mind that something was not working as it should. In other words, I felt that there was a better way to be moving, a better way to be, but I could not define it. No, I had no pain or discomfort, it was just a sense that I was using more effort than necessary. I thought that there should be fluidity and ease within the body but I wasn't able to access it.....I reached out to my dance teachers but no one gave me a satisfactory answer. I was told to change the way I was holding myself and my parts, which is what I was already doing. Clearly this was not the answer I was looking for and I was struggling to even define the problem for myself.

Time moved on, I fulfilled my civic duties as most 18-year-old Israelis do, serving two years in the military. But the nagging question was still stuck in the back of my mind: What was it that I could not put my finger on?

After my military service came to its end I followed my heart, my now-husband and moved to Paris. A while later I was introduced to a Biology professor from La Sorbonne who worked with actors in her spare time. I shared with her my search to find an answer to this question I had. I was very adamant that I wasn't interested in therapy of any kind. She told me about an interesting lecture she heard by this man who was an Alexander Technique teacher and suggested I give him a call. So, I called, what did I have to lose?

I made an appointment to meet with him for a lesson.

As I arrived he asked me to sit down and proceeded to tell me about F.M. Alexander and his discovery of the relationship of the head to the neck and the head and neck to the back, which constitutes the Primary Control of the self. I felt as if I was struck by a lightning bolt , and I remember saying to myself, **“I knew it! There IS something there!”**

In that lesson, as I learned of FM Alexander's discovery of the means to coordinate the **self**, I also found a potential answer to my question of how the body can work with more fluidity and natural ease.

That was the beginning of my Alexander Technique studies. I enjoyed the lessons but I knew that I did not experience or understand anything about this Head-Neck-Back relationship. The lessons felt good but still, I was wrestling in my mind what were the directions I was supposed to give to myself?

I did not experience my head going forward and up nor my spine lengthening or my back widening in the lessons so, *what was it?* There was more confusion than ever. While I lacked clarity in how to change, the idea of FM Alexander's discovery made sense to me intellectually and piqued my curiosity so much that I continued with the lessons.

After a couple of months, I found myself sitting on a bench in Paris waiting for the bus knowing that everything I was doing was wrong and having no idea how to change it. I was at a crossroads, quite literally because I was waiting for a bus, but also in my personal journey. I realized that a few lessons would not be enough to satisfy my curiosity or my search. In order to understand and know the work I would have to embody it, and to do that I'd have to study on a much more serious level. My study would have to involve all of me.

My teacher recommended that I take a lesson with Shmuel Nelkin, an Israeli teacher who was visiting Paris. Shmuel told me that there were two training courses in London and he had a training course in Jerusalem, Israel as well.

I wrote to both of the London schools to see if they would accept me as a trainee but I only received one reply. In the letter Mr. Macdonald requested that I come to London so that he could meet me in order to see if he should consider me as a candidate for his training course. I booked a few lessons with Mr. Macdonald and headed to London.

The moment Macdonald put one hand on the back of my head, I felt the second lightning bolt strike me. This time I knew I had experienced the Head-Neck-Back relationship! Here was the embodied experience of the ideas. I knew I found my teacher.

Macdonald put my name on a waiting list and sent me to wait back in Paris. ///// In early spring 1981 a letter came to let me know that my probationary studies were to start in three weeks. I packed my bags and headed to London and never looked back.

My training commenced in April 1981 and **I loved it**. It challenged me in every way: Physically, mentally and intellectually.

With time, it answered my original questions, and also presented me with a process for how to investigate and solve these mysteries myself.

The training gave me the means by which I could look beyond what I already knew and it helped me dare to step into the unknown. And boy that was *amazing*. I was able to see myself in a new light from within and without.

To this day Mr. Macdonald's words ring in my head:

- **AIM UP, STAY BACK, FEET TO THE GROUND.**
- **WHEN AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED, DO NOT TRY THE SAME THING AGAIN**
- **TRY ANOTHER WRONG, IT JUST MIGHT BE THE RIGHT**
- **THIS IS TOO SERIOUS TO BE SERIOUS ABOUT**



And there were so many more...

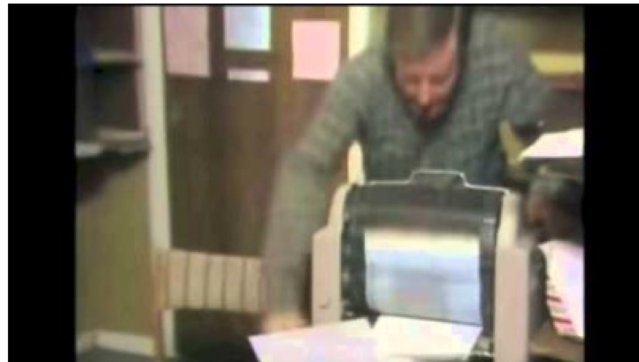
His words of assurance to signal that you were on the right path were at best **NOT BAD**, or **YES, MORE LIKE IT**.

He would guide us with his hands and advise us to **FEEL FOR IT**, it being the student's flow of **UP** or the life in the body.

I began to realize that I needed to enrich my learning with the knowledge of what stood behind it. I was already inspired, but in order to create the strongest foundation for myself I had to explore the fundamentals. I needed to read FM Alexander's books as well as the writings of others familiar with the work.

But there was a major obstacle: during the early 1980s F.M. Alexander's books were out of print.

At some point, one of my fellow trainees found a copy in a used book store, I believe it was *Man's Supreme Inheritance*. He photocopied it and gave each one of us a copy.



I cherished it so much that I spent a whole weekend sewing it together and binding it to look like a real book. I treasured it for many, many years. //// As time passed, F.M.'s four books were back in publication and I was able to replace my cherished hand-sewn copy. Over time, many more books and articles began to be available by those who have trained with F.M. and others as well.

I found myself referring to the books more and more to build on my training to clarify and deepen my understanding of F.M.'s discovery and ideas. I tried to **really** understand the process he had to take so he could realize that remarkable internal relativity he later named The Primary Control.

It would be negligent of me if I didn't take a moment to acknowledge that Alexander's writings contain racist and incorrect beliefs. Scholars of many stripes have long had to deal with primary sources that contain racist, ignorant, antiquated ideas that have no place in our society. As Alexander teachers, and especially as one of those who so closely regards his writings, it's important to acknowledge the bigotry and ignorance contained in his books.

I will not make excuses for Alexander, nor will I say simply or dismissively that he was a man of his time. To me, his texts are a treasure trove: there are diamonds and there are also some lumps of coal.

Reading F.M. Alexander became, for me, one of the pillars of my studies along with continued work, exchange and dialogue with colleagues who had many more years of experience than myself. My own private teaching and training new teachers were essential as well.

I wrestled with the questions of -

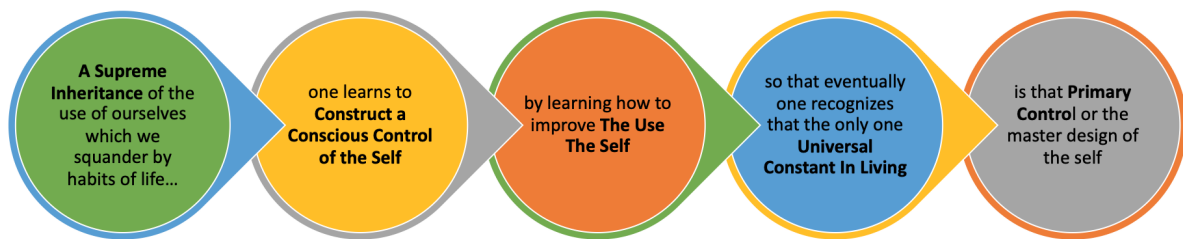
Do I, as a teacher, truly understand the fullest meaning of what I read in the books and am I communicating it to my students?

How do I teach a student the principles of the 'Primary Control' with the greatest clarity and accuracy?

And what is the simplest way to convey it in words and sensory messages?

To substantiate my reasoning I constantly go back and mine the books again and again and again. To this day, when I read FM's writings and related material, new ideas light up and I solidify my conception so that I am able to explain and improve on my teaching.

When I meet with a new pupil for the first time, I often begin my introduction to the Technique by explaining that we are all born with **A Supreme Inheritance** of the use of ourselves which we squander by habits of life. Therefore, during the course of lessons one learns to **Construct a Conscious Control of the Self** by learning how to improve **The Use The Self** so that eventually one recognizes that the only one **Universal Constant In Living** is that **Primary Control** or the master design of the self. Of course I do not necessarily use these exact words, I simplify them a bit, but I choose to use them here to highlight the significance of the titles of F.M.'s 4 books.



I would like to highlight some of the passages that I return to again and again. These words continue to help me sharpen my understanding and clarify my conception to chart and develop the direction of my work.

In the last paragraph of the first chapter of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* F.M writes:

"For in the mind of man lies the secret of his ability to resist, to conquer and finally to govern the circumstance of his life, and only by the discovery of that secret will he ever be able to realize completely the perfect condition of mens sana in corpore sano." (A healthy mind in a healthy body).

Here, in one sentence is the sum meaning of our work - to facilitate the means by which the pupil can inhibit an immediate response to stimuli, can be taught how to reconsider their response through a continuous thought process and to project new directions so that **it** will become the manner by which they will then control any response to stimuli.

Only by following this process can one change one's condition.

Here is another paragraph from MSI chapter 6 that I use to illustrate the importance of the opposing forces and gravity's role in particular:

"The primary principles involved in obtaining a correct standing position is the placing of the feet in that position which will ensure their greatest effect as base, pivot, and fulcrum, and thereby throw the limbs and trunk into that pose in which they may be correctly influenced and aided by the force of gravity."

He continues by adding that,

“...The hips should be allowed to go back as far as is possible without altering the balance affected by the position of the feet, and without deliberately throwing the body forward. The movement starts at the ankle, and affects particularly the joints of the ankles and the hips. When inclining the body forward, there must be no bending of spine or neck; from the hips upwards relative positions of all parts of the torso must remain unchanged.”



I use this simple phrase ***the feet are base, pivot, and fulcrum*** regularly in my lessons and it is remarkable how once the pupil experiences the **ground**, - **Up** becomes so clear.

The knowledge of the ground is critical to one's orientation in relation to their surroundings, to others, and of course within themselves.

The ground is where our base is, our feet oppose the ground. We don't start at our hips, we come from the ground underneath us. We lengthen up along the spine but we oppose the whole self up from the ground.

One must use the opposition to the ground as a whole, not as a collection of parts. So now my student has the choice to lengthen up along the spine to aim up while moving in space and oppose the ground to get up from the chair, instead of using **momentum** to initiate movement. One aims up to move forward, one does not move forward in order to get up.

Another passage that has influenced my teaching and understanding is from *The Evolution of A Technique in The Use Of The Self*.

It is an example of how Alexander himself was evolving with time.

In the 1932 Edition of *The Use Of The Self*, Alexander wrote:

“...After further experimentation I found at last that in order to maintain a lengthening of the stature it was necessary that my head should tend to go upwards, not downwards, when I put it forward; in short that to lengthen *I must put my head forward and up*

As is shewn by what follows, this proved to be the primary control of use in all activities.”

This implies some relativity of head to body

In the 1955 publication he changes his description of The Primary Control to:

“...After further experimentation I found at last that in order to maintain a lengthening of the stature it was necessary that my head should tend to go upwards, not downwards, when I put it forward; in short that to lengthen *I must put my head forward and up*

The experiences which followed my awareness of this were the forerunners of a recognition of that relativity in the use of my head, neck, and other parts which proved to be a primary control of the general use of the self.”

1932

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1955

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The Use of the Self

Wow, here it is so clearly expressed: **It is the relativity of the parts to each other that matters...** Again with just a few simple words our understanding deepens.

Frank Pierce Jones writes In Body Awareness in Action" Chapter 9 'The Alexander Training Course': **"One of the basic principles of the technique seems to be that the amount of Kinesthetic information conveyed is in *indirect* proportion to the force used in conveying it".**

In other words - **less is more...**

"One of the basic principles of the technique seems to be that the amount of Kinesthetic information conveyed is in *indirect* proportion to the force used in conveying it."

Body Awareness in Action, Frank Pierce Jones

There are so many passages and phrases in the books that give me material for thought

"Thinking In Activity" (in The Universal Constant In Living F.M takes a term from Dewey) - **Thinking In Activity should become a new way of responding to stimuli.**

....The messages, preventative or otherwise, must be projected *in their right sequence* throughout the activity.

“All together, one after the other”. Sequence matters but only when we relate it to the whole. Macdonald quotes F.M in The Alexander Technique As I See It.

Beyond those passages there are explanations for the relationship between teacher and pupil and their respective responsibilities in a lesson and a guidance of how to conduct a lesson. How to view and understand Inhibition, Non-Doing and the Relationship of the trunk to limbs and so much more.



How do you bring these words to life? While ordinary on the surface they invite us to think and explore beyond what we understand at first glance. For instance, when we use the word **DIRECTIONS** it connotes so many meanings and we must be aware of them all so that we can clarify them to the pupil through the sensory touch and the verbal guidance. One aspect of the directions is the guidance for the head-neck-back

relationship, from there we must find the direction to the **UP FLOW** or the life force in the body and as these go in their respective directions we direct the **movement** in space.....

To connect to the inner **FLOW** and the ongoing renewal of these directions, I use a **definitive rhythm, a pulsing**, to deliver the directions both sensorilly and verbally. This helps to impart a **FLOW** of direction, **CREATING** the inner music of the self, **GUIDING** the life force of the body, to and then through the pupil. It's an incredibly difficult experience to describe in words. My students should not only hear my direction, they should experience it, and join along the flow.

Alexander's and associated writings have informed and continue to enrich my teaching. And in turn, my students. Through the years, my students have shared their personal experiences and growth with me through poems, photos and cards.

When a student brings a poem to a lesson to share with me, it is an expression of their personal experience of their learning. It's not about me at all. It's about what they have taken from their studies. Many of them go to art, images and texts to illuminate and affirm the experiences they have had as a result of learning this work.

As one of my students told me not too long ago, "**I feel delicious**" **when I walk down the street**. What a wonderful way to describe being oneself.

I'd like to share a few examples before we finish.

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

"There is no use trying," said Alice; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't
had much practice,"
said the Queen. "When
I was your age, I
always did it for half an
hour a day. Why,
**Sometimes I've
believed as many as
six impossible things
before breakfast**".

The student wrote in
the card "...you have
taught me to not only
believe in impossible things but to also, on occasions, *actually do them*."

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believe impossible things."
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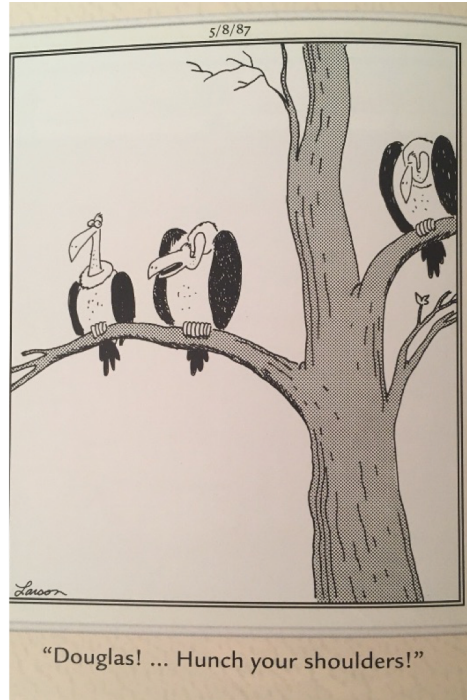
"Knots"

By R.D. Laing

The range of what we think and do
Is limited by what we fail to notice.
And because we fail to notice
That we fail notice
There is little we can do
To change
Until we notice
How failing to notice
Shapes our thoughts and deeds.

When a student realizes that in order to change you can not stay the same

The Far Side
Gary Larson



The picture of the birds encouraging Douglas to slump like them. **Lauren Hallal while in training realizes that from now on she is following her own directions...**



My granddaughter and her father, a connection between the ground and up, trusting, Smiling, falling up is so exciting

We all read F.M's - and many others' - books and literature during our years of training. But we should not underestimate the importance of re-reading the books regularly once we graduate and become teachers. I find it continually enriches my teaching. I consider my teaching similar to that of a music instructor; my work is to teach the students the means by which they can connect to the **Music of their inner self**. They can realize the flow of themselves in all the dimensions of life; spiritual, mental, physical and intellectual. Much like a well-tuned musical instrument.

The activity of living is just like singing a song - it ebbs and flows. This is the essence of my teaching, my art.

Finally, I would like to give my thanks to Rika Cohen who is unable to be here. She is a dear friend, an amazing teacher and mentor to me. I met Rika while I was training in London and soon after my graduation we forged a close bond of friendship and collaboration. Rika never tired of encouraging me to go forward, to meet challenges head on and to always look beyond what I already knew and to dive into the unknown.

We would always find time to exchange work together and talk about how we, the teachers, understood the Principles of the work and how to impart them to the pupil.

Despite her decline, while she still could, she would ask me when I came to visit - "What are you working on right now? What are you thinking?"

Rika, I miss your advice and wisdom but your words are with me always.