

A Conversation with Marjory Barlow

by Joan Schirle

MARJORY BARLOW IS A MASTER Teacher of the Alexander Technique. The niece of F.M. Alexander, she began lessons in her teens and has been teaching for fifty-four years. In this conversation with Joan Schirle, she talks about Alexander himself, the nature of his work, and the demands of being a teacher. It was taped on August 12, 1986, during the First International Alexander Teachers' Congress in Stony Brook, New York.

J.S.: Would you say that F.M. Alexander was an extraordinarily patient man to have experimented with himself in this way—to come up with this?

BARLOW: I simply can't believe it—it's the most fantastic story! I think that he was a very passionate, very tempestuous man, and in his initial state very quick-tempered. My mother said that if he saw someone ill-treating an animal or something like that, he literally saw red; they were afraid he was going to murder somebody one day! He was really so quick, and this is his initial endowment, really. Before I started going to Ashley Place to have lessons, my mother warned

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me; she said "You'll be in tears every day." Only once—but it wasn't F.M. who did it. (laughs) And this was the fantastic change, you see—and, of course, it was very important to him to apply the work to these terrifically quick, deep emo-

tional responses. In a way that was *why* the work appealed to me when I first read *Constructive Conscious Control*: that it was possible (a) to become more aware, to reach perhaps a level of awareness that was a little bit better than the one I'd got, and (b) not to be so subject to these emotional swings. I was like a pendulum.

J.S.: Was it difficult for F.M. to be patient with beginners?

BARLOW: It *had* been, obviously—from what my mother told me about how cross he was going to get with me—but by the time I landed up there, it was 1932, and he was never impatient with me or with anybody I saw him teaching. He realized, you see . . . he really knew and remembered how difficult it was. He used to say to me sometimes: "People who come here are the salt of the earth; but if they knew what they were going to have to undergo, they wouldn't come." Then he added: "But where else can they go?"

J.S.: How would you talk about what Alexander called "Direction"?

BARLOW: I would say that every time an idea comes to you to do anything at all, messages are sent from your brain through your nervous system to the rest of you—I'm not a scientist, I'm an Alexander teacher, and this is the way I see it, very simply, really—and the movement is then carried out. Before we have lessons, all this is totally automatic. Habits are built up, and they are built up in the nervous system. It is not the old muscles and bones—it is the direct connection. There is no division between your brain and the rest of your nervous

system, and it is that immediacy that is so wonderful; when you send a message, a conscious message, it is there before you know it. And if anything gets into the work that is interposed—for example, a lot of people have "images," or all that sort of nonsense—that is all unnecessary.

To me, he was the most religious person I have ever met.

J.S.: So when you speak of how we interfere with ourselves, you are speaking of that neuro-response that takes place between the brain and the rest of the body, and how we interfere with the purity or the directness of it?

BARLOW: Yes. When the stimulus comes—I mean, this really brings us back to inhibition, doesn't it? *This* is the keystone of the whole Alexander Technique. You see, he could not get anywhere. He tried going up every avenue that he could think of, and it was not until he realized that every time that the stimulus came to speak, back went his head. And he tried *everything*, from putting it [the head] forward to . . . everything. One day he saw that it was his response—his automatic habitual response to a stimulus—that was the trouble: It was so quick. He realized that his first work—when the stimulus came—was to say "No!" Not to say "No!" to the stimulus—and this is very important—but to say "No!" to the *first* reaction to that idea. What happened at first was a habitual thing. If you say "No!" there is the stimulus, there is the response. But

if you do not say "No!" it is like that—it is habitual, it is perpetual motion—just like an automaton. We are a lot of robots, really. But if you do not allow that response to happen when the stimulus comes, there's a little bit of space between the two, a little bit of freedom there—and the only freedom we'll ever have in this world, I think. People talk about freedom in a big way. But if you can refuse to respond to the stimulus, you have three choices: You can allow your habitual response to happen, because it is the most appropriate for the situation you are in; or you can decide to make a conscious new response; or, best of all, you can decide to do nothing—if that is appropriate. It gives you the chance to respond appropriately to this moment.

J.S.: You are one of the few teachers whose writings talk about the emotions and the spirit relative to the ideas of conscious control. Does that come from your own personality, or was Alexander himself interested in these areas and we just do not hear so much about that aspect of his work?

BARLOW: I'm glad you've asked me that, because it is very difficult to define what a religious person is. One thing he

was *not*, was dogmatic. He was asked about religion, because people loved to pin F.M. down—to get his opinion on this, that, or the other. And they would ask him direct questions, for example, "What do you believe, F.M.?" He would reply: "I believe everything and I believe nothing."

He would not pontificate on subjects that were not his special province. He had his own way, his own beliefs, his own relationship with the universe—it sounds a bit silly, really—but he had a sense, I'm sure, of the universe being a rather intelligent place. He had a great sense of purpose in his whole life, for

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he had had a very strict religious upbringing. Church on Sundays, three times a day, Sunday School in the afternoon, all the children—my mother told me this, of course. He was a very religious boy and young man. He had a younger brother who got meningitis and screamed; because they were very far from doctors, nobody could do any-

thing. F.M. prayed and prayed, but the baby died. And this made him think again: this really brought him up short. To me, he was the most religious person in the real sense of anybody I have ever met. And he was so inspiring. He really could lift you if you were in a bad state. Just by talking to him, somehow, and talking about the work . . . suddenly you were up *there*—you know, rather like Bach's music—and it sort of all made sense. . . .

J.S.: In your own work and studies you have made connections between his work and some very practical Eastern spiritual philosophies. There are some teachers who consider that this work applies only to the body and mind, but the spirit and emotions can be affected as well.

BARLOW: Of course. It is the whole person, isn't it? And I think, rather like F.M., that I had a very strong religious sense from the beginning—from wherever one gets it—and have gone down quite a number of paths. You see, you have a criteria . . . since I started doing the work, I would explore these various avenues. When I came up against a contradiction with the Technique, it was the other thing that went. I have that lovely



Michael Frederik, Congress Director, enjoys a lesson with Marjory Barlow, as she demonstrates table work during one of her Master Classes. (photo by M. Frederik)

guide with me in everything, really; and if it conflicts with what I know about the Technique, I can't be interested any longer. But there are certain things which do not conflict at all. I do not allow these things that I pursue for my own personal development to come into my teaching, except indirectly, of course—one cannot help saying what one believes. But I certainly would not

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approve of any kind of admixture. . . I do think the battle is to keep the Alexander teaching pure. By that I do not mean that people cannot develop their own ideas; but when it becomes a bit of T'ai Chi and a bit of yoga and a bit of this and a bit of that, there isn't time in a training course for that—there really isn't time.

J.S.: Do you think there is a lot of that going on in the teaching now?

BARLOW: Well, there is, isn't there? I know that it is inevitable with any teaching, when you look back through history. With time, it becomes diluted, it becomes changed, it becomes adulterated, if you like; and we all have to bring to it what we are. This is really what we are talking about, isn't it? What the person is. The extraordinary thing about F.M. was that he had no school. He was entirely himself. . . he was absolutely original.

J.S.: What have you found to be the most difficult thing for a teacher-trainee to learn about Alexander's work?

BARLOW: The whole idea of the training course to me is teaching people to know how to work on themselves—to get those experiences which cannot come from wonderful teachers' hands—of actually making your own new experiences with what happens when you work on yourself. Otherwise, they haven't got anything to teach their pupils about how to work on themselves. So a lot of the time is spent working on yourself, just as it was in F.M.'s class.

J.S.: How important do you think good hands are to a teacher?

BARLOW: I think they are very, very important. And if the person has really worked very hard on himself, that delicate . . . "craftsmanship"—I think that is the word—is terribly important, because

you can put people awfully wrong by giving them a wrong stimulus. But I do not think it is the main thing. The main thing in teaching is really insisting that the person himself works. You see, this is not something that you get from the outside. I always go back to F.M.—what happened with him. There he was with a problem. What did he do? What was the method he used to get from (a) where his problem was to (b) the solution? He used to say, "Anybody can do what I do, if they will do what I did." None of you want anything to do with that—nobody wants to use this.

There are many important things about the hands. It is very important how you put your hands on. You've got to be watching yourself all the time: That is the important thing. And another thing that is frightfully important is how you take them off. It is almost as important—how you take your hands off. You are giving somebody the directions; then you get an idea you are going to go somewhere else in the body, and the whole nervous system jars.

It is always new. It's never the same, even with the same pupil.

J.S.: How do you retain your sense of freedom and excitement about the technique after these many years of teaching? How do you keep from getting fixed about the work?

BARLOW: Well, it is such an exciting thing. . . you see, it is always new. I have been terribly lucky. I find it more exciting the longer I do it. You are always having new experiences, and I learn from my pupils, all the time—really, I ought to be paying them! No, truly, I feel this. . . the whole thing is such an exciting adventure. If you are working on yourself, you are making new experiences, so that it is never the same, even with the same pupil. And that is very interesting. F.M. used to say, "The ideal is—if you can—to approach your pupils every time you give them a lesson as if you had never seen them before and to see them as they are today." You do not bring to this encounter all you know about them—how they have been in the past. "Give them a chance," he said, "to be what they are today." And this is a very important idea. If one could treat one's nearest and dearest this way and not bring—when you see them in the

morning—every thing that has happened in the past forty-six years (laughs), it gives everybody freedom. Lovely.

J.S.: Do you look forward to further developments in this work, either in your work or that of your students? Where do you see the Alexander Technique headed?

BARLOW: I look forward to it developing in many, many different ways. F.M. used to say that we are only on the fringe of this thing, only on the fringe. We've got so much more to learn, and it will develop in all sorts of directions and be applied to all sorts of different things. But the danger is that the real basis of it will get lost. He continually said to us: "Stick to principle. If you stick to principle, if you use the basic thing that I used to get from where I was to where I wanted to be, you can't go wrong." People have so many different talents and gifts and directions in which they want to go that, given basic fidelity to that thing, you cannot go wrong. It is when they throw away the baby with the bath water—this is what worries me about the Technique in certain developments. I always go back to F.M.: What did he do? I say to my students, "If you are in doubt, go back to what he did." That is what we've got to do.

J.S.: What do you think has been your major contribution to the technique through your training of teachers or your writings or your work generally?

BARLOW: I never thought about it. . . I have had such fun doing it, but it has never come into my head, really. You know, Bill is the writer; Bill is the one who lectures and gives interviews. All I have ever wanted is to be left alone, in peace—not to be interfered with. To work quietly with someone who is prepared to come and spend half an hour with me in my room—that is all I have ever asked of life since I started the Technique. But it is not quite like that, is it? (laughing) The great thing is that it has

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enabled me to live my life, I hope, in improving what I am interested in; what I have always been interested in is knowing what I am doing. Thinking. Think about that for a minute—thinking what you are doing. These phrases come and

go; they are in the language. We never think about what they mean. . . "thinking" what you are doing. I like to say "he" "you are doing; that is the other one." But "Thinking in activity" was such an important idea to F.M.; he used to call it a means of learning to control human reaction. And his idea was that you could bring the body and the mind—in all, the whole organism, the whole person—into a unity.

J.S.: This "thinking in activity"—is this different from what we normally associate with the word "thinking?"

BARLOW: Oh, yes. It is a very special quality, isn't it? Words are so difficult, aren't they? As F.M. would say, "Any word I use has got barnacles on it." Everybody brings his past experience of that word. F.M. said to me, "I really need to invent a new language; but if I had, nobody would have understood a word we said." There you are. No, it is very hard to put it into words what "ordering" or giving messages is. It is a very. . . *attentive* process. You've got to pay attention. This is something we all find extremely difficult—our attention span is about a second and a half. Talking about

ordering, F.M. said, "Any fool can think of one thing at a time and go on thinking of it; but when you have to go on thinking one thing and add two, and go on thinking of one, and add two, and add *three*, that is about as much as most of us are capable of in a lifetime's learning." But he did give us examples of a long sequence of orders. . . in the monkey and going into monkey and going on the back of the chair with the hands on the chair, because you've got to give the whole sequence.

We need a kind of awareness which is as wide as possible.

J.S.: What you have just been discussing is why I think so many performing artists are tuned in to Alexander's work—because they have to be thinking of so many things at once and this is such a wonderful practice for that.

BARLOW: That's right. Paying attention to more than one thing is *life*. He used to say that if we hadn't got that capacity, none of us would be here. . . we would

not have survived. He was very keen on being attentive to what was going on around you. When you're talking to someone, you've got to be attentive to them, to be *with* them.

J.S.: Did he talk about concentration?

BARLOW: Oh, did he not! It was a forbidden word! *Verboten!* Absolutely. F.M. explained that concentration means bringing everything to a point. But what we need is a kind of awareness which is as wide as possible, taking into account as many factors as we are capable of. The reason *why* musicians and people like that are so. . . in the same world. . . is because they have to spend hour after hour after hour [practicing]. When I go to a concert, I look at those instrumentalists and I think, "My goodness! How many hours of solitary, disciplined work have gone into the fact that they are sitting here tonight, playing their violin or whatever?" That is what the work is. And unless you do that, especially if you are a teacher and training people; unless you are doing that work *every* day, like playing your scales—F.M. used to say, "*Every* day! Go back to those words." 🐼

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