

Back in the Beginning: Reminiscences of F. M. Alexander

Walter Carrington

I feel greatly privileged to stand before you tonight. It is just seventy years ago this August since I first read *Man's Supreme Inheritance* and sought to answer the simple question 'What is the Alexander Technique?' Of course, at that time I did not have the experience to understand what I was reading. It was only long afterwards that I realized that Alexander's writings, like the traveller's tales of distant lands, can only to be truly appreciated when we have made the journey ourselves.

Just the other day I was reading that book again, in class, to our students and I can well recall my early puzzlement. But now, towards the end of a long teaching career, I have gained some experience and I believe that I can understand it a little better.

Recently I came across a quotation from that great physicist, Niels Bohr, that neatly describes our difficulty. He said, 'When the great innovation appears, it will seem muddled and strange. It will only be half understood by its discoverer and a mystery to everyone else. For any idea that does not appear bizarre at first, there is no hope.'

Alexander's work was certainly such a 'great innovation' and he himself would have testified that for many years he only 'half understood it'. Certainly it first appeared as a 'mystery to everyone else', and to many people it still seems bizarre.

It originated in his early recognition of a very personal need, the need to breathe fully and freely and so to use his voice adequately. He found the satisfaction of that need in the process of learning to carry the axis of his body in a fully upright position, a task not as simple as it sounds. But the process of self-help that he evolved is, in fact, very simple. As he wrote in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*: 'I do not profess to offer a finally perfected theory, for by so doing I should lay myself

open to the same arguments I have advanced about other theories of the same nature. I say frankly that we are only at the beginnings of understanding, and my own wish is to keep my theory as simple as possible, to avoid any dogma.' Three essential elements are involved; to *stop* (or, as we say, 'to inhibit'), to *direct* (or 'to order'), and to *wish* (or 'to give consent'). To *stop* whatever we are doing, or whatever we are thinking of doing at the present moment. To recall the *direction* in which our heads must go (the direction that Alexander called 'forward and up' whilst our bodies are being supported against gravity, and then, *wishing* it to happen, 'giving consent', or the positive wish to move in the direction freely, without conscious effort. (People often forget that our simple wish is the prime source of all our energy).

But I do not want to talk about the Technique tonight; I want to talk to you about Alexander himself. People have often asked me, 'You knew him – what was he really like?' I tried to answer this question at the recent celebration in Australia House. I said he was a *caring* man, when he worked with you, you felt that he truly cared about your problems and difficulties and that he intended to do his best to help you in every way he could.

This was certainly an important aspect of his character; but what I want to talk about is the man himself, his *individuality*, for he was a unique *individual*, and it was his individuality that characterized his life and work. He was, indeed, the living embodiment of his own Technique, and if you want to understand the Technique you must know something of the man. (If you have not already done so, I recommend you to read *A Family History* by his great-niece, Jackie Evans, or the new biography by Michael Bloch that was published recently). He always insisted that he was in no way exceptional, that what he had done, anybody could do, but the story of his life must give us all food for thought.

We know that at school he was a difficult pupil, never taking anything on trust and always questioning anything he was told. He once remarked that he never could understand how it was possible to believe anything without first experiencing

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it, and in later life, when someone made some confident assertion, he would often ask, 'How can you be sure that you have all the premises from which to make your deductions?' And when people spoke of *proof*, he would often smile and say, 'First of all, please show me the proof of your proof.'

His outlook on life did not favour 'trying to be right'. For him, the most important task was to find out what was wrong in any situation and then to prevent it. He used to say that it is useless for anyone to try and be right whilst they are still doing the wrong thing. He also said that if you ask anyone to do something, there is always a possibility that they cannot, for some reason that has been overlooked. But if you ask them *not* to do something, that should be entirely possible. Thus the main principle of his Technique was *prevention*; and through his long years of teaching experience he came to recognize the truth of the simple statement that if you do not do the wrong thing, 'the right thing does itself'.

Throughout his life he always treated other people as individuals. He was not interested in class, creed or colour. His pupils had individual problems and difficulties. He did not think of them as actors or musicians or dancers, still less as stammerers or back sufferers. For him they were all different and their reactions and capability of understanding was different. He knew that a teaching approach that serves one person will not necessarily serve another; that is why he insisted on calling his second book *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*.

But, as well as his pupils, he always treated everyone he met as individuals, whether they were shop assistants or bank clerks, lawyers or clergy or tax inspectors. I remember years ago seeing him putting on his overcoat and gathering up his papers and setting out to visit the local inspector of taxes who would help him to fill in his tax return.

I also vividly remember an occasion in the early days of the last war. I had joined the Royal Air Force and been accepted for training as aircrew. I was not called up at once because there were so many of us to train. I was on what was known as deferred service. It was 1940 and I was working with Alexan-

der at Ashley Place. He was shortly to leave for America and I wanted, if possible, to remain with him until he left. Consequently I applied for a postponement of my call-up and was notified to appear before a deferment board a few weeks later.

One afternoon, when the time came, I went to FM and told him where I was going. Immediately he replied that he was coming with me, picked up his hat, and we set off together on the train to Hammersmith. There we found the cluster of Nissen huts where the board was located and we were shown into a room where three elderly men were sitting behind a desk. They gave the impression that they were probably borough councillors. After a brief introduction the inevitable question was asked, 'What is the Alexander Technique?' Without any hesitation FM rose to his feet and proceeded to give a demonstration, using the chairman as his model. The other two members of the board sat around watching intently and nodding their heads in approval. When he had finished there was no question as to whether my application would be granted. In fact they said that if I should need a further extension it would also be granted, and indeed, some months later when I had to appear before them again, they expressed their disappointment that FM was no longer with me.

Of course Alexander was familiar with the problems arising from a group situation, about dealing with people in groups. His first training course involved a group of students but he still dealt with them individually. Later on some form of society or institution was proposed. He was not happy about this, lest the paramount needs of individuals should be forgotten. He never cared to join a club or a society himself. He realized that such organizations always involve rules and regulations, and for him self-regulation was the paramount concern. He maintained that while it was important to describe and explain to everybody what should not be done, it was totally unjustifiable to tell anyone what they should do. All his own teaching was based on this premise. As his students, we were to work on ourselves and find out through our indi-

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vidual experience how to work on others, how to teach. He never taught anybody how to teach.

Ethel Webb told a famous story. She had worked with him on an apprenticeship basis for a number of years. Now, one day she was to go on her own to teach in a famous girls' school. When she came to say good-bye to him he said, 'Now, Ethel, be sure that you don't do anything that you have seen me do.' He abominated imitation.

Unfortunately, however, we live in a very different age, where bureaucracy reigns, where everything must be regulated and classified, where 'the blame culture' affords a feast for lawyers and insurance underwriters. Nothing can be done without obtaining a licence. We are forced to recognize the power of officialdom.

What then of the future of our work? How can we avoid the imposition of collective regulation where individual self-regulation is the essence of our teaching? We should bear in mind that all officials are *individuals* with the same needs and problems as ourselves. We must show them what our work is all about, but we must not misrepresent it in order to satisfy them with some specious definition or description for the sake of some illusory advantage.

With regard to societies and professional bodies, we must remember that they are, after all, associations of individuals. Their function may be to regulate and impose conformity, but if in doing so they stifle individuality, the danger is obvious. Just remember the parable of the Gadarene swine!

The true function of any society of Alexander teachers must be to support and help and encourage, and to provide a forum where we can meet and come together and enjoy the companionship of our colleagues.

The assembly of you all here tonight perfectly exemplifies the point I wish to make. On the second page of your programme is described 'the International Congress spirit'. I should like to read it to you. It says, 'In the spirit of the International Congress we value the many approaches to the learning and teaching of Alexander's work. Registration for the Congress implies agreement to participate in this spirit of

mutual respect and not to demean the person or work of other participants. We ask all those enrolling for their participation in fostering a supportive atmosphere where diversity is encouraged and respectful dialogue enjoyed.'

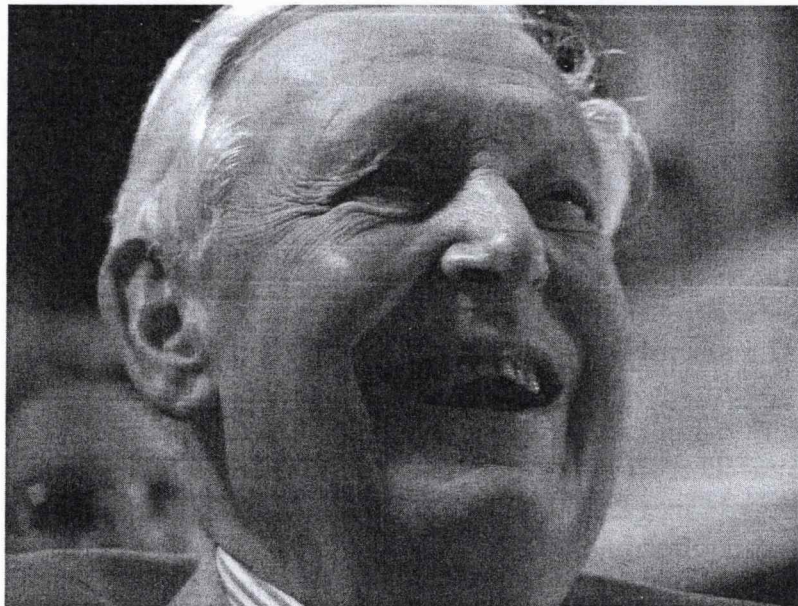
Finally, I cannot do better than to close with Alexander's favourite Shakespearean quotation:

'This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.'

Hamlet

Walter Carrington trained with F. Matthias Alexander from 1936 to 1939. From 1941 to 1946 he served as a pilot in the Royal Air Force. He worked at Alexander's teachers' training course 1946-55 and continued running the training course after Alexander's death at the Constructive Teaching Centre in London of which he is the director. He has given workshops internationally for teachers, and has lectured and written extensively on the Technique.

18 Lansdowne Road
London W11 3LL
www.alexandertek.com



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