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MARJORIE BARSTOW

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By Frank Ottiwell

Marj, Marj, Marj. You've really gone haven't you? There is no time for you to help me, with those brilliant powers of observation, the crystal clarity of your thinking and the delicate but irresistible use of your hands, to unfold and experience my essential self just once more. Your death is both a mournful loss and a stimulating new beginning for all of us who worked with you and loved you. We must now fulfill what has necessarily become part of our destiny: to work with ourselves as best we can to continue to develop the gift you so generously shared with us.

Although I have many memories of being with and working with Marj, the two most memorable were my first and what turned out to be my last. I have written before about my first meeting with Marj. It was at the Riverside campus of the University of California. We met in a ground floor classroom that opened onto a playing field where a group of university students were playing baseball. In a manner I was to become very familiar with, Marj went from person to person, spending as much time with each one as she felt necessary. When she came to me she stayed for about thirty seconds, just coming to the very top of my neck and the base of my skull. I went "way" up and at the same time felt everything in me shift and reorganize and fall into place. As Marj left me to go on to the next pupil I had an almost overwhelming desire to run onto the playing field and join the baseball game -- I who had never had an athletic bone in my body. Suddenly I understood that people who are athletic and play games aren't doing it just for the competition or to be "regular" people, but because exuberant movement is a natural expression of coordination.

I didn't become a notably exuberant mover, but a window of probability was wide open for a moment, and has been opened countless times since. I would have had a perfectly good life, I think, and even an O.K. career as an Alexander teacher if I had never met Marj, but don't think

I would have ever known that under the right circumstances there is a ball player in me.

My last meeting with Marj took place in October of 1993. Unlike the extraordinarily vital and physically flexible Marj I had known through her seventies and eighties, at ninety-four she was frail and quite bent over from what I supposed was osteoporosis. I had gone to Lincoln with Michael and Lena Frederick and Don Krim and we spent a few hours every afternoon working with Marj for about a week. One day I was standing and she was at my right side. We were all talking and she seemed almost just to be plucking lightly at my right arm and my right side near the base of my ribs. In my memory it almost seems as if she was plucking at my shirt rather than at my flesh and bones. I may be wrong about that but that was the quality of the touch. After a few moments of this I had what I consider the most profound experience of my life to date -- not just of my Alexander life, but also of the spiritual and emotional life. Not only did my scoliosis, which had been pulling me out of balance all my life, seem to evaporate, but I came into an absolute wholeness and oneness. There was a crystal clear differentiation of everything and absolutely no separation from anything.

While the stimuli of my life, and my wretched habitual responses, have brought me back to a less wondrous place, I know that, like the baseball player, another way exists. I have been there, and I know that with attention and discipline and interest I can go there again and again. How could I not love, admire and hope to emulate the person who had it in her to let me experience myself not only as the person I always wanted to be, but as the person I didn't even know I could become.

I once asked Marj how she accounted for the quality of her work. She inhibited, as always, for a moment and then said: "Well, I decided one day that if I was going to do this work I had better do it." On another occasion

I asked her how she could bear to answer the same questions over and over. She looked me very directly and, after the usual pause and with what I would describe as an understanding smile, she said confidentially, "I never give myself up." This constant living example of someone doing the work, staying with herself and practicing what she called "constructive thinking" was a powerful and uplifting experience for any-

Continued On Page 16

Inside	
Board News Items	2
Announcements	2
NASTAT Committees	2
1996 AGM - Urbana	3
SPECIAL SECTION	
Primary Control	4
Charles Sanders Peirce	10
1994 Congress Diary	14
Remembering Marj	17
Letters To The Editor	19
Financial Report	20
COLUMNS	
From The Board	21
NASTAT Office	23
Group Teaching	24
Case Study	25
Pain	25
Defining The Technique	26
Collegiality	27
Earning A Living	28
From The Literature	31
Religion	32
Acting	33
Dance	34
Israeli Congress 1996	36
End Of An Era	36

one who would see it.

And then, of course, there was Marj's cheerfulness. The first time I received a letter from her signed, "Cheerfully, Marj," I was crushed. How could this great teacher and lady say something as icky as "Cheerfully, Marj"? It wasn't too long before I was able to see the value of cheerfulness. For one thing, it was a vast improvement over negativity, whining and complaining. Instead of getting stuck worrying about what had happened a moment ago and what might or might not happen later, her cheerfully "up" manner kept us very much in the present and moving right along. How typical of Marj to use her conscious constructive thinking to choose a way of being in the world that made things move along.

When I first knew Marj I often thought she didn't understand the questions she was being asked. There were many times when it was on the tip of my tongue to point out to her that she had misunderstood the question and to explain what had been asked. It was only after being around her for a while that I began to see that her answer had the answer to your question in it but that she was not directly telling you the answer. She always wanted you to do what she called "a little brain work." Giving answers is easy. Finding a way to get your pupil to discover the answer for her/him self is teaching. I confess I still give far too many answers.

The depth and complexity of Marj's understanding of the Technique, and of the person she was working with, was awe inspiring. At the same time, her approach to students was always one of utter simplicity. She always spoke of practicality, and inevitably credited what she called "Mr. Alexander's discoveries" as the source of her work. What she added, she called "a little bit of nothing." That little bit of nothing, of course, included infinite possibilities.

I saw an example of this simplicity and its possibilities in England at the time of the Brighton Congress. Michael Frederick arranged for Marj to do some work with a group of Israeli teachers who would not otherwise have had a chance to meet and work with her. Michael and I were also present. These sessions took place over a period of three days. At one point, with all of us sitting more or less in a circle, Marj came around in front of us, coming briefly to each teacher for a very short turn. As she was moving away from one of these brief turns the teacher she had just worked with said, "What did you just do?" Marj, with her customary twinkle, said, "Oh, I didn't do anything," and was continuing on her rounds. The teacher, however, not to be put off, stopped Marj in her tracks by saying in quite a commanding voice, "No, no. I want to know what you did. I have never gone up like that in my life." Marj paused for what even for her seemed a long time and then said simply and with a quiet sincerity, "Well, I think I just have less tension in my body than you have in yours." That answer was not questioned by anyone and I got the impression that everyone knew exactly what she meant. It was just as we had been taught and were teaching others: It was what Marj was and was not doing with herself that was the source of her gift, and her gift to her students. I am realizing now that she never pulled or pushed me in any way. Her work was always an invitation. Her insistence took the form of continuing to send invitations until sooner or later you accepted. In that she was tenacious.

Marjorie Barstow was born August 26, 1899 in Nebraska

and died in Nebraska almost 96 years later. She was born in Ord but her family moved to Lincoln when she was a year old and for the next 95 years her home was that very house they moved to in 1900. She was always very proud to tell us that her mother had designed the house. Marj travelled a great deal in the latter part of her life, but as far as I know, the only extended time she spent away from the big house on South 20th Street were the years she spent in London in F.M.'s first training program at Ashley Place and the years she spent in Boston as A.R.'s assistant.

In the twenties, before she went to Alexander training in 1931, Marj was a dancer and taught dancing. An example of her dancing and can be seen in the video of the brilliant television program National Public Broadcasting made of her called *Marj Barstow: Moving Naturally*. People often snicker at bit when they see this dancing. It probably looks hopelessly old-fashioned to them. Well, of course, it was seventy years ago so perhaps it does look old-fashioned now. But at the time her dancing was at the cutting edge of the avant garde. It represented a turn away from the formality and artificiality of the ballet of the time and a great leap towards natural movement and expression in dance. Isadora Duncan was the pioneer of this concept and Marj was even then moving with the times. Natural movement, arrived at by means of conscious constructive thinking, was later to become the hallmark of her Alexander teaching as well.

Her dance studio was to the side of the family home and above the carriage house, now the garage. These days it is being used for other purposes but it is still there and recognizable. When showing it to me in the seventies it was clear that those dancing days still held a very warm spot in Marj's heart.

In 1927, having been introduced to Alexander's writing, she and one of her sisters went to London for six months to have lessons with Mr. Alexander, as she always called him. The lessons were a success, and when she received an invitation from F.M. to join the first training course she made her arrangements and returned to London in 1931 to enter the class.

Years later I asked Patrick Macdonald if he remembered Marj from those days. He said, "Oh, yes. We all thought she was the best of the lot of us."

Marj was, de facto, the first graduate of F.M.'s formal training course. Of course, A.R. Alexander, Irene Tasker, Margaret Goldie, Ethel Webb and Irene Stewart were already teaching and assisting, having undergone a form of instruction that was probably more akin to what we would call an apprenticeship. Of those who went through that first formally structured course, only Marj elected not to take the fourth year F.M. offered - offered partly, it is suggested, because having spent a great deal of their training time preparing *The Merchant of Venice*, he felt he owed them another year. But Marj, for a variety of reasons, decided it was time for her to get back to Lincoln, and so she was the first of that first group out the door and qualified, certificate in hand, in 1934

During the Second World War, F.M. and A.R. Alexander came to America with the children from the Little School, but before the war was over F.M. felt he wanted to return to England. This left A.R. in Boston on his own and it was then that he invited Marj to go to Boston as his assistant. She spent several years there working with A.R. and, while it was always clear that when she spoke of Mr. Alexander and of his discoveries she was referring to F.M., she always spoke with the highest regard of A.R. and his way of working.

On returning to Lincoln from Boston, Marj became more

and more involved with her father's businesses as his health began to decline. She more or less disappeared from the Alexander world -- except, of course, for the work she continued to do with herself. Then, in the late fifties and early sixties people, particularly musicians, began to seek her out and gradually she re-emerged as a teacher.

At that time she was giving lessons any of us would recognize -- half-hour, lots of chair work etc. Then she got an invitation from Southern Methodist University to go to Dallas and teach in the International Stage Movement Program sponsored by the Theater Department. As Marj tells the story, she walked into her teaching room to find sixty people waiting for her. Nonplussed but ever resilient, she said, "Well, I've come all this way and you are all here, so let's see what we can do." She divided them into groups of fifteen and on the spot began to develop the group work for which she became both famous and, in some people's eyes, notorious.

There is just one point I would like to make to people who didn't actually experience Marj's group work, and that is that it was not so much group work and it was *working in a group*: Marj worked one-to-one, as any Alexander teacher does, but she did it in a group setting.

I have heard that F.M.'s advice to teachers who had pupils who were being difficult, or not getting it, was, "Don't let them break your heart." As far as I could tell Marj's heart was never broken by people who didn't understand her or her work. I think this was particularly true of people, who themselves had never known Alexander, who wrote unpleasant letters to her or published pieces claiming she wasn't teaching the Alexander Technique. She seemed to think it was all pretty funny. Those of us who did work with her and knew how disciplined, accurate and absolutely true to Alexander's principles she was, were confounded and saddened by this lack of understanding, and by all of the missed opportunities it represented.

At the First International Congress at Stony Brook, New York, one of the senior teachers who was having some work from Marj said, "Ah, this reminds me of F.M."

Well, anyway, for those who didn't know her and those who did, it is too late. She is gone, and, take her for all in all: we shall not look upon her like again.

Good night, sweet Marj, and flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest.

REMEMBERING MARJ

By Robert Rickover

Perhaps its a strange notion, but I've always felt that Marj was a kind of rocket ship, dispatched by F.M. Alexander along with a payload of his basic discoveries, to be planted back in the nurturing soil of her native Nebraska. Here she would be free to apply and develop those discoveries far, far away from the nasty factional squabbles which always seemed to surround him.

When I first met Marj in 1979 she had been doing just that for nearly half a century. By that time people from all over the world were coming to Lincoln to study with her and there were often a hundred people or more attending her summer workshops. Much of her time was spent away from Lincoln teaching workshops around the country and later around the world. I made it a point to see her frequently, but it wasn't until I moved to Lincoln in 1990 that I really got to know her well.

The last five years of her life were a period of great change for her. She cut back sharply on her travel schedule and began moving away from large group teaching towards smaller and smaller groups, and by the end of her life, she was working almost entirely with individual students. This narrowing of her focus coincided with a truly remarkable expansion in her teaching capacities. Her work became more and more refined, more and more powerful. During the final years of her teaching, she spontaneously developed dozens of new teaching "procedures", in effect creating a whole new framework within which to teach Alexander's discoveries.

I know that Alexander would have been amazed, and extremely proud, to have seen Marj 's accomplishments. And those of us who had the good fortune to have studied with her will be forever grateful for that opportunity.

By Alice R. Pryor

Marj Barstow was probably the single most important teacher I have had in my life. I came to her at a time when I was having severe reactions to the environment and to food because my immune system had been worn down by many years of exposure to toxic art materials. Marj impressed me so powerfully at that first workshop that I knew I had to do whatever I could in order to study with her even if it involved living in a tent, which I did do for several summers. Her ever calm manner in approaching the work and her own daily activities was very attractive to me since my life was in chaos. I paid attention to how she ordered her workshops, how she balanced activity with quiet times of listening and discussion. Marj was so encouraging and supportive. I was impressed with her ability to captivate and hold the attention of very large groups and to empower them to make discoveries for themselves. The work as she taught it gave order and balance to my life. I found myself riveted by her skill.

Her enthusiasm for the work and her ability to take pleasure in the simplest things taught me a great deal about how to enjoy life. She delighted in country drives in Michigan where she exclaimed over the windmills, the barns and the silos. She loved to read billboards and signs out loud in the most hilarious manner. In Colorado, she had a great time giving a "no hands on" lesson to a rock musician who had engaged her in conversation in a local cafe, and from whom she accepted free tickets to his concert. In Australia, she thrilled and shrieked over a harrowing ride down a mountain side and held a Koala bear. It seemed that she got equal pleasure on shopping trips, trying on silly hats, mugging for the camera, teasing us as we tried to keep up with her, and enjoying the raucous, lively noon meals which Jeremy and Rosemary Chance had arranged for a dozen people each day. The time we spent over breakfast with Marj and Ericka

Continued On Next Page

Whittaker was especially wonderful. The stories and discussions about their experiences in London at the training class made Jeremy and I wish we had a tape recorder.

I treasure Marj for how she listened to us, her students. How respectful she was of our ideas, whether she agreed with them or not. And often, how she incorporated our ideas into her own teaching. She was a rare and unique spirit.

I miss her.

By Joan Mercer

I first called Marjorie in March of 1976 and she said I should come up for the summer session. She suggested some books for me to read. She also mentioned that I could begin to notice "the relationship of my whole head to my whole body." Thus began one of the major themes of my relationship with Marjorie Barstow as teacher-student; "watch yourself."

The first summer was truly amazing. Daily, Marjorie emphasized Mr. Alexander's discoveries and impressed upon us that we had to make these discoveries for ourselves. Always encouraging us to observe ourselves and observe each other. "What is the head-neck relationship/reflex?" "Trust your thinking." I can still hear her saying to me "My hands are talking to your sensory mechanism. My voice is talking to your thinking." "This delicacy of movement is what our feelings aren't quite used to. You can't get a big feeling from a little movement." I find myself, years later, saying the exact words to my students and each time they are spoken it is as if Marjorie's hands are on me again-taking me up, easing me up, showing me the relationship of my whole head to my whole body.

I studied with Marjorie whenever I could: summer and winter workshops, trips in and out of Lincoln on weekends, traveling around the country to colleges and universities to observe and later to assist her when she taught. It was at one of these universities that I had one of my most remarkable lessons with Marjorie. It was spring of 1979 and we were at Washington University in St. Louis. Marjorie was letting me assist her as she worked with students and faculty in the Drama Department. I guess it was my time to feel Marj's fire. The first thing I did was to stand on a bench to work with Sid Friedman, the 6'5" head of the Drama Department. I heard Marj's voice behind me, asking just what I thought I was doing. I tried to explain myself. "But Marj, I'm only 5' tall. I have to have help." With incredible patience, Marjorie showed me how I could just place my hands "up there" while taking myself up. She was right and I learned to use myself in a totally new way. This incident was the lead in to the real lesson of the visit.

Later that day, there was a graduate seminar and Marjorie

and I had been invited to attend and participate. One of the students began to challenge Marjorie and I inappropriately began to defend her. One look from Marjorie was enough for me to become quiet but, the real correction was yet to come. A couple of minutes later we were back in the studio and Marjorie came over to me and began to put hands on me and give me a lesson, what a lesson! She busted my ego completely, telling me she didn't need me to intervene on her behalf, it was not my place to protect her, "You must learn to watch yourself." At the same time, she was giving me a most incredible hands on experience, filling me with an exquisite experience of "the use of the Self," guiding me into the chair, out of the chair with an ease I had never known, over and over.

When she was through with me I retreated to the rest room. I cried and cried. I felt so exposed, vulnerable, so corrected. There was no way I could be defensive with her. I had to listen with my ears, with my whole psycho-physical self. I had to change. I avoided Marjorie the rest of the afternoon. I was staying with cousins, and that evening while we were fixing dinner, Marjorie telephoned me. She asked me to come to tea the next day.

When I arrived at Marjorie's the next day she greeted me with a tremendous amount of caring. She wanted to know how I was doing. If I understood how important it was to always conduct myself as an example. She once again gave me a remarkable hands on lesson - helping me to drink my tea with ease.

Through the years I knew I could always call Marjorie for advice and council and she was always there for me. In 1990, I decided I needed to have something in writing that would show that I was her student and one of her "teachers". I also wanted to apply for certification from NASTAT and wanted her sanction and approval. I received this letter from her.

To Whom It May Concern:

Joan Claire Levine has studied the Alexander Technique with me since 1976. She has demonstrated a clear understanding of the discoveries and principles of the F. M. Alexander Technique, communicates them well to others and is qualified to teach the Technique.

Marjorie Barstow, February, 1990

Accompanying this was a note telling me to "be sure to call her if I ever needed her help again." I can never repay the debt I owe Marjorie Barstow - my teacher, my mentor and finally my friend.

Charles Sanders Peirce - Continued From Page 13

phalanx onward and upward forever."

Peirce's theory of development fosters open-minded experimentation. Reality exists independent of any person or group. Anyone, with persistence and an open mind can discover what Alexander did, so far as his discovery is truth.

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