

Creative Attention

Thoughts on learning and teaching,
and on a social dimension to the Alexander Technique

Tim Soar, September 2018

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I was giving an Alexander Technique lesson to a young Baroque violinist, talking with her and using my hands to ... to ... well, to do what I do with my hands when I'm teaching ... Suddenly she turned to make eye contact and demanded, with some emphasis, "What ARE you DOING?!" I made the decision to treat this as a straightforward question, took my hands off, thought for perhaps ten seconds, and then offered: "I am your continuo player." She frowned, then said, "Oh ... OK, that makes sense. Good. I get it." And we went back calmly to what we were doing. Something of a high point of my powers of explanation, I thought.

This cryptic exchange deserves some explanation. For readers unfamiliar with Early Music performance practice, the best definition of continuo that I have come across is "an eighteenth century rhythm section". The function of the rhythm section, as everyone knows, is to provide a reliable and compelling "groove" that gives a soloist the support she needs in order to play successfully. A really skilful continuo player – most likely playing a harpsichord – working with a music student in an educational setting, can play in such a way as to bring out the very best in the student's playing. The student, aware of this shift in what she is able to do musically – aware both intellectually and experientially – is thus educated, with the subtlety and immediacy appropriate to the subject, to be a better musician. Of course, useful information can also be exchanged verbally between coach and student, but without the actual musical experience, verbal information is just so much "talk". In a different situation, with a more experienced soloist, the musical dialog becomes more equal – less "educational" – but the role of the continuo player is still, partly, that of a facilitator. In either case there is no question that it is the *soloist* who plays so successfully (the continuo player cannot "do it for them") and also that the continuo player is an indispensable part of the proceedings.

The idea of becoming as good a "continuo player" as I am able, has become my primary model for my Alexander teaching; I shall attempt to describe something of how this works, and what is involved, in what follows. The "continuo model" has also been one influence on me towards the somewhat unconventional idea that the Alexander Technique can reasonably be understood as a social, ensemble, specifically "duet", form.

Learning to listen

Good listening has two effects. Firstly, and more obviously, the quality of one's listening affects what is heard; listening to a dawn chorus, for example, the more deeply I listen, the more species of bird I can identify. Secondly, listening affects what is said; a child who feels able to trust a particular adult to pay attention to her properly, is likely to feel able to share thoughts that are important to her, which might otherwise remain unsaid. This "causative listening" is an example of what I am going to call "creative attention", something which I believe is central to good Alexander practice.

Creative attention is a kind of sensory activity that is in some sense not just "receiving" (afferent) in quality, but also "giving" (efferent) and causative.

Listening requires – obviously – that we are prepared to stop talking ourselves, to be willing not to be the centre of attention, to be a quiet – or even invisible – observer. Usually we think of listening to something outside ourselves, maybe another person, but of course musicians refine their skills partly by listening to themselves. One of the skills that is often very new to beginner students of the Alexander Technique is the process of "sensing oneself" – for example, to be able to notice when you hold your breath for no good reason. Like normal listening, developing this awareness is largely a question of what Margaret Goldie referred to as "*coming to quiet*" – the stilling of one's internal chatter to the extent that one becomes able simply to notice what is going on.

One way to understand this would be to draw an analogy with the skills involved in watching timid and beautiful wild animals. A large part of becoming a great wildlife photographer, for example, lies in learning to be silent and invisible so successfully that wild animals are not frightened to show themselves. Similarly, this is how we get to find out about our innate "animal" coordination through the Alexander Technique: we practise coming to quiet in order that the subtle neuromuscular impulses of our natural coordination begin to emerge, and to assert themselves more clearly. Like watching wildlife, if we get a glimpse for a few seconds, we might count ourselves lucky. In this analogy, a good teacher is like a "tracker" or a "field guide" – their job is to know how to search out "the Wild", and to have trained and heightened their senses in order to know when an imminent encounter requires particular quiet and attention.

In Alexander terms, this kind of quietening down, in order to "listen", is partly a process of letting go of undue muscular tightening. Unnecessary muscle tension functions as "noise" in our systems that interferes with our ability to sense properly. But coming to quiet is not a case of "turning muscles off" (as some body-workers are inclined to describe the release of muscular tension) but rather of bringing ourselves towards a state of responsive alertness. If anything, this is a process of unlocking our musculature into readiness – *waking it up*, rather than *turning it off*. To listen is to be alert. To be silent is to be "switched on". The sensory function of our musculature is at least as important as its contractile function.

In addition to this, there is a second kind of coming to quiet that has to be addressed, and that is the silencing of one's preconceptions. Anyone who has been to a life drawing class will know that the real challenge is to learn to *look* properly, and that the biggest obstacle to looking properly is that we have preconceptions about what a face, or a shoulder, or a leg is like. And that instead of drawing what we see, we tend to draw what we erroneously feel we know. Much of the discipline in life drawing lies in learning to step away from such preconceptions, and in practising looking properly. This touches on the principle of "faulty sensory appreciation" in Alexander's work. There is an ever present risk that we may misperceive that which is right in front of us, which needs to be countered through the rejection of what we "feel" we know, but in fact do not, and through the practice of proper observation – observation which questions and corrects our preconceptions.

So, with my hands on a student, what I sense going on in her is a challenge to my tactile and kinaesthetic preconceptions, in the same way as the model in a life drawing class is a challenge to what I believe I see. I do not touch, or otherwise observe, a student primarily in order to judge or to analyse, but in order to correct *myself* and my own (mis)understanding.

At this point, if I am successful, some kind of alchemy begins to happen. This kind of listening touch, which seeks only to observe accurately – to say simply "Am I understanding you?" – is not just a silence, but has a certain "positive charge" to it. The student – whether she notices it consciously or not – is held in a field of creative attention, which has a beneficial effect of itself, and also invites the student's own proprioceptive listening processes to become more alert and present.

The Expanded Field of Awareness

Someone once described to me her experience of holding the alto line in the amateur choir to which she belongs. She told me very earnestly that what you have to do is to "blot out" all the other singers and listen only to yourself. However understandable this idea is, musically speaking it is fundamentally in error. What good musicians do is to listen to the whole sound that the ensemble is making, and to sense, moderate and adjust their own part in that sound so as to make the *overall* performance that reaches the audience as good as possible. This is a process of recognising that the only thing one can do is to play one's own part as honestly as possible, but in such a way that the overall outcome is one of harmonious collaboration. If we think again of the skilled continuo player working with a student musician, the continuo player can of course *only* play their own part, but it is possible to do so in such a way that the ensemble effect is enhanced: the soloist is empowered to play better by virtue of being held in the continuo player's perception of the whole. In Alexander terms this awareness, not simply of oneself, but of one's own input to the overall outcome of a situation is known as an *expanded field of awareness* – a joining up of awareness of the "inside", and awareness of the "outside" – "self" and "environment", "me" and "you" – into a single whole. What continuo players do musically, skilled Alexander people do proprioceptively.

Stimulus and Response

My technique is based on inhibition, the inhibition of undesirable, unwanted responses to stimuli, and hence it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction.

FM Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living*, pages 87–88.

At the very heart of the Alexander Technique is a particular take on our process of stimulus and response. I was once in a group lesson with a group of music students and another Alexander teacher, Philippa, who was working with one of the violinists. Philippa was holding the student's violin; as she approached the student, the student's left shoulder hitched up closer to her ear. Philippa backed off – the student's shoulder let go of its red alert. Philippa approached again – “Help! Help!” cried the student's shoulder again. The Alexander Technique is a broad system that may encompass body mapping, knowledge about breathing and movement, and so on, but fundamentally, the Alexander Technique is concerned with how we may learn to prevent our unhelpful reactions in a whole range of situations in order to give ourselves access to more successful options.

The only way you can possibly sort out the tangle is by learning to stop, by learning to say “no”.

Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud*, page 56.

You are not here to do exercises, or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong, and to learn to deal with it.

FM Alexander, *The Essential Writings*, page 9.

What is the stimulus that “always puts you wrong”? It may be your relationship with your violin. It might be a computer that, for no apparent reason, deletes two hours of work and then freezes. Pain also is stimulus that we tend to respond to by tightening and restricting ourselves. But I want to suggest that our most powerful stimuli come from our relationships with other people: the people we love, and the people who “wind us up”, and of course the more-than-significant overlap that often exists between these two groups.

If the Alexander Technique is essentially a study of troublesome stimulus and intelligent response, and if our most deeply felt stimuli come from other people, then the Alexander Technique becomes a social process. The Alexander Technique is fundamentally about how we are with other people.

My ideal for an Alexander lesson is that it should be a model of skilful and harmonious human interaction. Although I am a “teacher”, I do not work in a didactic way – what I aim to do is to set up a supportive collaboration with my students. This is not simply a way of putting them at their ease whilst I explain the principles of the Alexander Technique, but rather, the nature of our interaction should itself be representative of the principles of the Alexander Technique. It might be objected that my efforts to provide a “safe” environment in my teaching room do not directly address the idea of “learning to meet a stimulus that

always puts them wrong”, but it is my experience that people will not generally be able to risk a leap into allowing something new to happen, unless they feel profoundly safe. It is not a case of “being nice” to one’s students, but rather involves, at its best, the teacher embodying a “radically reasonable” way of being, which the student notices and becomes interested in. What I hope to be able to teach (or to demonstrate) is that “tightness” (either muscular or emotional) is not necessary to our interactions with each other, and that such tightness is detrimental to our mental, physical and social agility and wellbeing.

When we are successful, students often report back to me that outside the teaching room – in “real life” – they found themselves to be more “bombproof”: not scared stiff as they walked onto the concert platform, able not to snap at the kids, able to take their time to consider their options when asked a difficult question at work, able to leave their left shoulder alone when confronted by a violin ... They are learning to be radically reasonable – meeting the stimulus that always puts them wrong, and learning to deal with it.

I have to say that I am not the originator of this radically reasonable approach, which was fundamental to Walter Carrington’s way of working. It was often said of Walter that one had the distinct impression that nothing bad could happen while he was around. This almost “protective” energy on the part of the teacher – the impression (conscious or otherwise) that I hope to engender in my students that “nothing bad” will be permitted to happen – is important to my understanding of what I am aiming to do when I’m teaching. Continuo players do this too: the greatest gift a continuo player can give to a soloist is the unspoken message that “it doesn’t matter what you do, or what happens, I can, and I will, catch you and make sure everything is ok.” In this way, a less experienced student is able to make a performance in which their “mistakes” are not permitted to spoil the overall musical success, and a more experienced soloist is emboldened to take risks, and to make musical lines work which could not do so without the groove of the continuo.

Leading and Following

I recently asked several groups of undergraduate music students, in the context of Alexander Technique group classes, what they thought about the relative merits of “being a leader” and “being a follower”. All of them, without hesitation, said that not to be able to do both was a sign of a serious problem. One of the jazz students commented, to swift agreement from his colleagues, that not only is it essential to be able to either, but that it is often an advantage to be able to do both at once. Not one of them thought it necessary to ask if my question referred to what was desirable in leading and following in a musical context, or what was desirable in “life in general”.

Beyond the very crude notions of “telling someone what to do” (leading) and “doing what you’re told” (following), lies the endlessly complex world of successful collaboration and creative human interaction. There are a number of great “partner contact forms” that embody the complexities of leading and following; two good examples would be Tango and

Aikido. Both of these disciplines derive their creative energies from the paradoxes of “following in order to lead” and “leading in order to follow”. My understanding of the Alexander Technique is that it can be seen as another such partner contact form, which utilises these complex patterns of leading and following between the two partners. This idea applies equally, whether working hands-on in a lesson, or in the skilful management of a difficult interpersonal interaction in any situation.

Waking the Genie, and Helping the Genie through the Labyrinth

In what follows, I should explain what I mean by a “Genie”. The meaning of the word that I intend is not the magical, and possibly malign, giants of Arabian Nights, but represents an archaic meaning of the word “genius” – the “resident spirit” of a particular place such as a forest or a mountain. These genii are benign Nature-spirits whose character traits define the atmosphere and true nature of the place that they inhabit.

It is because of the work that you've done on yourself, that you are doing on yourself, that you have the standard that enables you to know what is going on, but against that yardstick, you are then trying to find out as much as you possibly can about the pupil.

Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud*, page 46.

Classically, Alexander teachers are trained to use their hands in teaching, fundamentally by attending to their *own* coordination. They are taught not to “try to do anything” to their partner/student, but to put their hands on, coordinate themselves, and to wait. If this seems strange, consider how you start to feel if you have to spend too much time with someone who is very irritable. The over-reactivity of that person begins, almost inevitably, to affect your own reactive threshold. Similarly, if I put my hands on a student whilst I am tight in myself, all I will succeed in communicating through my hands is my own tension. Conversely, if I am, in myself, free, well organised and responsive, those qualities will be what I tend to communicate with my student. It seems that the student's neuromuscular system is “entrained” by the calmer and more organised neuromuscular system of a good teacher. I have heard Alexander teacher Bruce Fertman describe this process as “plugging the student in” – connecting them to the “power supply” of the teacher's well organised coordination. It's a bit like jump-starting a car from the charged battery of another car.

It is not simply that the student “feeds from” the teacher's energy, but that the student's nervous system “recognises” something native to itself in the impulses it receives from the teacher, and this recognition seems to “wake up” the organisation of natural coordination in the student. In my own thinking at the moment, I'm calling this “Waking the Genie”; it is as if the natural “body intelligence” of certain deep parts of the student's nervous system has been asleep, and is now being woken up.

Interestingly, when one person puts their hands on another in this way, the “direction of flow” is not always as one would expect. It is not unusual for trainee teachers, practising

their hands on skills by working on more experienced teachers, to find that the experienced teacher's "self-buoyancy" comes back to them through their hands. The outward appearance is of the trainee working on the experienced teacher, but the internal dynamic is the opposite of that. Sometimes the flow even seems to go both ways, in the way that it might between two experienced musicians who support and encourage each other simultaneously.

That trainee teachers learn primarily to work on themselves as they put their hands on is essential, but if this is all a teacher does, then the effect is oddly empty. They put their hands on in a non-doing way, they organise themselves, their partner's Genie stirs, and then they move on, and repeat. It's all rather insular on the teacher's part. It is clear that the best teachers are far more interactive than this. Walter Carrington could use quite large amounts of force in a lesson, but always without the student feeling in the least that they were being "pulled about". John Nicholls, who directed my training, and who worked extensively with the Carringtons, questioned Walter closely over many years on the apparent disparity between the force that Walter himself would often use, the essentially "working-on-yourself" way of working in which he trained his student teachers, and Walter's disagreement with the approach of

those Alexander teachers who say, "I use my hands to take people's heads forward and up." To which I would reply, "Well, you're not supposed to take someone's head forward and up. That's just a manipulation. Instead you're to use the hands to see the neck isn't stiffened, the head isn't pulled back, and so on."

Walter Carrington, *Explaining the Alexander Technique*, page 96.

The problem with simply working on oneself whilst putting one's hands on a student is the same as that of the amateur singer who "blots out" the rest of the choir. The problem with "manipulation" is that it causes something in the student that does not arise from the character of their own Genie; it *imposes* something rather than inviting the student to *discover* something. In the sense that it is prescriptive and disempowers the student, it cannot be said to be teaching.

How are we to learn to use our hands in the most helpful way: working primarily on ourselves in order not to pass our tensions on to our students, but without becoming insular, and working with our hands in a more active way without that becoming manipulative?

It's a real puzzle, but one to which I have a proposed answer. The clue lies, I believe, in the easily overlooked latter part of Walter's advice: *find out as much as you possibly can about the pupil.*

"Waking the Genie" – jump-starting the student – is a process of inviting the student to join with the more strongly charged energy of the teacher's self-organisation. Although this seems "non-doing" in character, it is in fact a *leading* process. It is a mistake to think of this way of working as essentially passive in quality.

Being more interactive, less insular, and ultimately finding how to use the hands more helpfully (without “manipulating”) *seems* like a more active (leading) process, but it is not. This is other side of the process from “Waking the Genie”, and needs to be understood as the matching, balancing, *following* process, even though it *seems* more active. One way to begin to see a pattern here is that the woman in Tango, and the Uke (the partner who is thrown) in Aikido are in the “following” role, but they are in many ways more “active” – more athletic – than their “leading” partner.

This process of using the hands in a more interactive (following) way, I call “Helping the Genie through the Labyrinth”. The information I get through my hands, once the student’s Genie has woken up, is that it is, to a greater or lesser extent, “awake but trapped”. To say that another way: the student’s “body intelligence” cannot fully express itself, because of ongoing stiffenings and blockings happening in the student. It then becomes my job to “listen” (following, and with creative attention) with my hands well enough that I can sense more and more clearly how to ensure that these blockings are released (*using the hands to see the neck isn’t stiffened, the head isn’t pulled back, and so on*), and that the Genie is not blocked and frustrated in its search for freedom and expression. Getting able to sense how a particular person’s blockings can be “got out of the Genie’s way”, is my interpretation of Walter’s advice to “find out as much as you possibly can about the pupil”. This is the essential “other side of the coin”, the Yin-which-seems-Yang, to the Yang-which-seems-Yin of Waking the Genie.

My task of Helping the Genie through the Labyrinth involves working as hard as I need to, to remove obstacles from the Genie’s path (*to use the hands to see the neck isn’t stiffened, the head isn’t pulled back ...*). This is where the possible use of force comes in, but it is never ever force which acts directly upon the Genie itself, and tries to tell the Genie what to do (*you’re not supposed to take someone’s head forward and up*). I think this is how Walter was able to do what he did without the student ever feeling imposed upon.

Teaching Methods

I’m developing ways of presenting this subject matter to Alexander teachers and trainees, and others with a serious interest in hands on work, breaking it down into accessible steps and procedures. Maybe these procedures belong more in a workshop than in an essay. All I’ll write here are some general thoughts on how I approach coaching hands on skills.

In Aikido, it is a given that anyone can practise with anyone else. People with many years’ experience can practise with people quite new to Aikido. Strong people can practise with not so strong people, big with small, old with young, children with adults; it’s a great leveller! Everyone has something to learn from everyone else. Not only that, but in normal Aikido practice you swap roles continually with your partner. A child is expected to have the necessary focus to lead a senior teacher with decades of experience, and the senior teacher is expected to have the skill and sensitivity to follow a child, and vice versa. It’s an education

for both of them. It should be easier, in many ways, to practise with a senior Aikido practitioner, simply because they know what they are doing: they move well, and their focus is (or should be) unwavering. Partly influenced by my Aikido experience, and partly by my understanding of the Alexander Technique as an interpersonal process, I am led towards not being frightened of demystifying the skill of Alexander hands on, by teaching aspects of it to experienced students who are ready for it, but who are not necessarily teachers or trainees. Learning to take other people into one's field of awareness is, to me, so much an essential part of the Alexander Technique that I think it's important for anyone who is ready, and would like to explore it, to have the opportunity for some insight into the process.

Equal Procedures

It can be difficult for even an experienced Alexander practitioner not to see hands on work as some kind of corrective or didactic process, but rather as something similar to the relationship between a soloist and a continuo player. Partly because of this I find it useful sometimes to blur the roles of "teacher" and "student". I often use "symmetrical", "non-teaching" procedures (such as sitting back to back, or standing facing one's partner with the palms of one or both hands meeting with the partner's palms, walking hand in hand, etc) partly in order to emphasise the fact that we are working collaboratively, in duet.

Transparency

One of the most important principles here is that an experienced Alexander teacher is easier to work with than a beginner – it should be the same as in Aikido practice. Often, even at a first attempt, students can, with suitable instruction, make a really meaningful connection with me through their hands. I used to have a friend who went salmon fishing; he had a knack, if we were by a river, of seeing *through* the surface of the water; he was used to looking for fish! I, on the other hand, could never see past the surface ripples and reflections of the water's surface. In learning hands on skills we need to learn to sense past the "surface contact" of our hands and into the depths of our partner. Experienced Alexander people are usually more "transparent" in this way; it is easier to "sense through" them – their musculature is more elastic, their nervous systems less noisy, their boundary with their environment less brittle and fixed – than beginners. So it makes sense to practise with someone who is as transparent as possible. When students sense the transparency of their partner through their hands for the first time, it is often a revelation; their understanding of the Alexander Technique is transformed – they have learned experientially a huge lesson in how a human can be organised. If I am a relatively transparent and easy-to-sense subject for someone new to hands on work, I'm not trying to say "I can do this because I'm better than you.", but more like "We are both the same: human. This is how a human works; this is how you work. This is how we can cooperate when we meet." My transparency cultivates transparency, and awareness of transparency, in my partner. Learning hands on skills in this way is not primarily about learning to be an Alexander teacher, but it is rather to do with learning about ourselves through interacting with others.

Here is an example of this sort of thing happening in an Alexander lesson with another musician, a singer this time. We had been working on an aria during the lesson, and towards the end we experimented with her singing whilst we sat back to back, with very close contact between our two backs. As she sang, I had the most unexpected experience of the musculature of my torso “copying” hers strongly and in exact synchrony. I found myself “entrained” by the powerful and athletic muscular activity of her breathing. There is no other way to describe what happened than to say that she “breathed me”. I am not an opera singer, and I learned new things about the athleticism of opera singers in those couple of minutes, because I was doing those things myself, without having the knowledge or the skill to do them myself. When she stopped singing, I explained what had happened, and joked that I was a fraud, that she was the teacher, and that *I* should pay *her*. Then she told me what happened from her point of view: her experience had been just as unexpected as mine. She pointed out that I am bigger and stronger than she is, and that she had felt, whilst singing, that she had access to my greater muscular strength, and that singing with that extra reservoir of strength available to her had changed and helped her singing. We were both leading, we were both following, we were both using ourselves transparently, we were both giving creative attention; we both learned something new.

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