

## **On the Alexander Technique : With Pearl Ausubel**

*For the better part of a decade I have gone to Pearl Ausubel for private lessons. Typically, if I arrive before our appointed time, I wait for a bit in her beautiful lobby. However, on one particular afternoon last autumn, I breezed through her lobby, arrived at her door and rang her bell; only then realizing that I was nearly fifteen minutes early. Pearl's smiling face soon greeted me. I apologized and sheepishly asked if she was ready for me. Her response-- "It's all right. I'm always ready."*

*There are moments when words and experience link up with a truth that reaches beyond what is casually apparent. These moments are not uncommon around Pearl.*

*Through the year that followed I worked with Pearl to write this article. It was not unusual, for our work sessions to take place on the NYC subway as she - at the age of 85 - adeptly navigated connections underground on the way home after teaching on the training course. I would ask questions, transcribe answers, and pass them back to her for edits and re-edits. Sometimes I would just sit with her after a lesson as we attempted to articulate the ineffable experience of her practice and teaching of the Alexander Technique; other times she would take an entire section and write or rewrite it fresh. What follows is the distillation of this interview process with Pearl.*

*Nanette Walsh  
October 2006*

### ***Pearl Ausubel's Biography***

I was born in Waterbury, Connecticut in 1920. The '29 crash brought my family to New York City. I graduated from Brooklyn College in 1941 with majors in biology and chemistry, was married in 1943, had my first child in '45, my second in '50, and from that time never went back to science as a profession. I started following my husband from place to place, first as he served in the Public Health Service in Nicaragua and Guatemala, then Lexington, Kentucky. After his discharge from USPHS, we moved to Buffalo, then to New York City in order for him to earn a PhD in Developmental Psychology, and finally to Champaign-Urbana at the University of Illinois, where we lived for 16 years. I became a sounding board for all his theories in medicine, developmental psychology and learning theories. During this period we had a sabbatical in New Zealand and a second one in Italy. After 16 years, we moved to Toronto for two years and then finally back to NYC for good in 1968.

In the meantime my twin sister Judy Leibowitz had become an Alexander teacher and had established ACAT along with Debby Caplan, Frank Ottiwell and two other teachers. I started working with Judy and in 1972 decided to train to be an Alexander teacher. I started training in the Fall of 1972. Our training was two years. There was one big class of 12 students. We were trained by Judy Leibowitz, Debbie Caplan and Ilana Rubinfeld. Graduates from the previous training classes were invited to volunteer. I graduated in January 1975 and have been teaching at ACAT ever since – first as a volunteer, then as an assistant, and finally as a senior teacher. After over 30 years of teaching, I will be retiring and moving from New York to Northampton, Massachusetts, in June 2007.

### ***Pearl Ausubel on the Evolution of the Use of her Hands***

When I graduated I felt I needed more training, so I volunteered in everybody's class – whoever would have me – three days a week. I did that until they started paying me to be an assistant—that was maybe three years. It was five years after I graduated before I thought I might know what I was doing, ten years before I really felt that I knew and I am still in the process of feeling that I finally maybe know what I am doing.

Judy taught me how to use my hands: her ten fingers gave simultaneous messages to wherever her fingers were. Everything I do now that is different arose out of somebody coming with a problem. How I use my hands evolved trying to meet the needs of students, and my not knowing that some conditions are irreversible led me to try different approaches. Sometimes some irreversible states proved to be quite reversible.

My early private students were mainly young musicians referred by their teachers, who were also coming for lessons. I learned from my students – out of their needs. When I first started teaching I had a professional cellist with scleroderma as a student. Her fingers were barely moveable. What could I do? I started by trying to soften her fingers as part of the lesson when she came before concerts, holding the hand in mine as I followed the release of tension with my fingertips. Eventually all the musicians I worked with loved having me work with their hands and fingers, though some wouldn't do it before a concert – they didn't feel they had the necessary tension in their hands – maybe it was a feeling of a lack of control.

I started working with the face because I had a student with pathological headaches. I started by just easing the tension in her forehead with my fingertips while she was lying on the table. Then I gradually moved on to different parts of the face as I felt the tension release with my fingertips. I assume what I am doing is widening, widening inside myself and therefore widening my hands. Widening is an inside expansion. I sense the muscles ease and the tension I felt earlier is gone. I am always thinking out and away from the center. The expression on the face changes and people think they've had a face lift.

Similarly, the things I do with student's legs on the table started when I would work on Judy. Judy had polio as a teenager and she was left with no normal muscles in her legs. She had no way that she could release the tension in them by herself. She would guide me saying, "Hey, stay with that." So I stayed wherever I put my hands, and very often I would sense something happening. Whatever I was doing helped to relieve that tension.

I think what Judy really taught me was that one doesn't just put hands on and take them away. My hands have to have a message, and I have to figure out a way to get that message to my student so that he receives that message. My purpose is to help him release the tensions that keep him from expanding to the full extent that he can at that time. I have to stay with it long enough for my message to get through, and then I have to follow through with the message I am getting back from my student. Sometimes I don't get a response, and I have to know that I can't make anything happen. I have to be willing for nothing to happen and to move on. I can't stand there directing all day waiting for an answer; if I don't get one I go on.

### ***Putting Hands On***

I don't put my hands on "willy nilly" expecting something to happen. I put my hands on with my purpose in mind, but my hands have no intention. My hands are senders and receivers at the same time. My hands ask my student if she wants to release something (perhaps specific) towards a particular end. You can't get the major end without the specifics, but the specifics in themselves are not the major end. Just because you are lengthening and widening doesn't mean something is going to miraculously happen. Sometimes it does. Sometimes miracles happen. But most of life is not miraculous, so you don't look for a miracle. Know your purpose. Know what you want to have happen and have some idea of how to get there, without imposing your purpose on your student.

I teach people initially to put hands on a student as if the student is a soap bubble that you don't want to burst. If you come down lightly you can sense what is under your hands, otherwise all you are feeling is pressure; then you are limited, there is no where to go from there. Once you sense the release then you can move your hand in space by following the release.

Your hands, gentle or strong, are encouraging the student to do the work. A hand can come on gently and become firmer, following the student as he releases. The trick is not to let the firmness of pressure desensitize the hand or to try to make something happen instead of following what is happening and taking it just that little bit further than it can go on its own. The hand has to have a message but no intention; the message comes from the thought. It comes from the intention in the brain. It is hard to explain because ultimately the message is in the hand, in the innate direction memory of the hand.

I am trying to describe what I am doing. I have to figure it out by repeating it in order to explain it. It is like a musician: once a musician learns music, the memory of what is needed to play is there. Ultimately it seems to bypass the brain entirely. Then it's not about pressure, gentle or firm, it is about what you are sensing. Once it is in the hands, it is there, bypassing the brain, unless there is a conscious decision to add thought.

When I am teaching, I have to trust that the directions I am giving to my students I am also giving to myself. At this point, I don't need to think all the directions separately for myself every time I put a hand on somebody, there is no way that I can put a non-directed hand on; the direction is automatically there because I am putting hands on. My hands have already sent, received, and responded to the messages before my brain gets involved. It is only when I get no response from my student that I consciously direct myself.

### ***Following the Release***

I follow the release. I am a follower, not so much a doer. The student directs my hands in the way he wants to go. I can take him a little bit further than he can go himself, but I can only take his body as far as it is ready to go at the time. My hands and the student's body have a conversation. It can be like working with clay, when sometimes the clay will tell you what it wants. You have to be powerful but you also have to be gentle, and you have to come to it without imposing an agenda.

Judy used to say that a *release* is not a *relax*: it is a letting go of excess tension into a balanced dynamic tension between opposing muscle groups. If the student relaxes she has given up control. I don't want to give up control. I want a balanced dynamic tension in whatever I am doing. Too much of anything in one direction and I get the opposite of what I want to happen. Control isn't *holding*, it just means *not relaxed* – I am still in there knowing/directing what I want to happen and inhibiting what I don't want to happen.

I don't do anything. It does itself. I can't determine what is happening, because it has to be the student's release. I can't be there with a preconceived idea. I just have to be there to catch the movement. The student is telling me the direction she wants to go, and then I can take her in that direction. And because she has already given me permission, I can take her further – just that little bit more than she can go on her own. I am giving her an experience of being in this new place, and eventually she'll be able to get there on her own. That's how people grow, because they can always go a little further than where they are.

### ***On Widening***

Widening is an internal three-dimensional expansion that includes lengthening. Lengthening does not necessarily include widening. Widening cannot be made to happen. Widening happens if you are not narrowing or tightening. Widening doesn't happen from the elbows. People often make this mistake – they try to “widen” to the elbows – usually by spreading them away from each other and lifting the upper arm tightening at the shoulder joint and thus obstructing the expansion of the torso. Widening is an inner expansion, a three-dimensional expansion through the entire torso up and out and underneath the shoulder girdle. Judy used to say that you are allowing more room for the skeleton.

As I put my hands on, I widen. If I am widening, my hands are going to separate away from each other, and whatever is in my hands will come with me. This movement may often be so slight that it is felt rather than seen. I feel the widening in my student, and I follow that. If I don't feel anything in my student, I come back to my self and consciously direct.

### ***Primary Control***

The head does not lead into movement in space. The head, when not pressing back and down on the neck, allows the torso to lengthen and widen (expand), which allows the torso to come *off* the legs. If the head isn't pressing back and down, it frees the spine to lengthen, which in turn frees the neck, which frees the head balance. The balance is dynamic! It's a circular thing: Which comes first the chicken or the egg? I think of the lengthening spine as part of an expanding torso. This is width. Lengthening is not necessarily a movement in space. And *up* is not a movement, it's a state of being, a quality of direction.

I don't like the words *primary control*. That may be my scientific background; I started out as a biologist. The words are an oversimplification. It's the totality of an experience and that experience involves grounding and the overall opposition of the parts that balance the individual in whatever state the individual is in. Of course, this also involves freeing the neck/head so that the head is not compressing the spine and is balanced – which allows for the overall expansion of

the individual. The head is important in its relation to the entirety of the individual. It is of primary, but relative, importance. I don't mind *primary*, it is the word *control* that I object to.

The problem is that people can be stuck on Alexander's words, which have to be defined every time you use them. The words have to be meaningful in terms of the experience. For example, *head forward and up*: I can't verbalize what it means. I can only know it by experiencing it, and I can only explain it by helping my student experience it.

I can say "You're head is balanced." That has meaning, and it's simple. I can talk about what I am thinking when I put my hands on someone; the words describe in sequence what I am thinking. What happens in the body happens all at once in relation to what my hands are saying, long before all the words are said. The words are what you take away from the experience, and it is important that the words, the message in your hands, and the experience all have the same meaning.

### ***Giving Head Direction***

There are many ways of giving head direction. I tell a beginning student to give up the tensions in the big neck muscles that are attached to the head. My hands are hopefully giving the same message. People don't know exactly which muscles they are so it has to be a general release of tension. Once they can give that up, I guide them into a balance of their head on top of the spine. As they become more familiar with head balance, I add other directions verbally and with my hands. I indicate that the neck is an extension of the torso and it extends up in back of the face. The front of the neck extends up as far as in-between the eyes (actually it's not quite that high but it is good to think it higher than it is), and the back of the neck extends to the base of the skull.

My hands are saying the same thing that the words are saying, but they are asking for those directions, not imposing them. Now I can add other directions with my hands. I can ask for other releases, for example, *shoulders away* (by extending the spread of my hands to the shoulders), or *neck lengthening out of the back* (by having my hand at the base of the skull and placing my forearm along the neck and upper back). The words aren't the experience; they may define or help identify the experience, which is much greater than the words. They may help the student make sense of the experience.

Each teacher has his or her own way of dealing with head direction. There is no one right way of giving directions. There are many ways. Your way has to be easy for yourself and easy for your student. We are all teaching neck free, head balanced, torso lengthening and widening, but we are all doing it from who we are. Your way comes from who you are and your approach to things.

### ***Chair Sequence***

I teach a natural sequence or progression in a chair lesson, as opposed to just getting in and out of a chair: Standing, getting into the chair, freeing the legs from the torso, coming up and out (expanding) through the torso, freeing the shoulder girdle, and then the arms.

I ask my student not to define the words I use (since each person has his own idiosyncratic definition of words) but to allow my hands to define the words, because the kinesthetic experience is greater than the verbal definition.

I start by asking my student to be grounded, to free the knee, ankle and hip joints, to allow the torso to come up off the legs, expanding three dimensionally. I continue by asking my student to allow the neck to be free. I ask him to give up whatever tensions he has in all the big neck muscles that are attached to the head. I ask him to free the head so that it is in a particular balance on the tip of the spine. When I sense that release, I can ask my student to allow his knees to bend from behind while he is still coming up off his legs. I can then guide him into sitting. It is my student's release that gives me permission to move him in space to the limit that his body can allow at this time.

Once the student is sitting, after head direction, I must help free his legs from his pelvis. There is no way he can really expand through his torso if his legs are stuck in the hip joints. The torso is in back of the legs; its energy is *up* through the torso, *off* the sit bones; and in front: *up* from the hip joints and pubic bone. The leg energy is *away* from the hip joint to the knee and *down* through the ankle and foot. Actually the energy is up and down, in and out - it's three dimensional.

All the while my hands are talking (directing) and defining what my words are saying. The words are not the experience, but they help the body define the experience as much as words can help define any experience. The experience is much greater than the words. The words are the tip of the iceberg. The words are what the student can take away from the experience, and repetition of the words can recreate the experience for the student to the extent that it is possible without the extra hand from the outside.

My hands are asking (directing) a student something and if he responds by a release, I can then take him into a movement to the extent of his release or as far as his body is ready to go at this time. I can't describe in words what a release feels like but when I do feel or sense it I can move that part with no effort.

I don't ask my student if he feels what is happening. That obliges him to "feel" something, and very often the feeling is so subtle that he won't recognize any feelings for a long time. I let my student know when I feel something happen in him, but since I can't describe in words what I feel or even identify a particular feeling, he has to eventually recognize that what he senses is happening arises out of our combined thoughts and intentions.

I now ask my student to expand throughout his torso up off the sit bones and from his hip joints, expanding through his rib cage, freeing his neck, and in turn his head to allow his head to freely balance. The balance of the head involves a slight rotation forward from the tip of the spine. I constantly reinforce head direction as well as knee forward (or leg away from hip joint) while I move my student back and forth on the hip joint. Once the torso has lengthened and widened (expanded), the shoulder girdle can release from the upper torso and free the arms, so they can rotate freely in the joint.

### *Table Sequence*

I think you can get an expansion on the table that you can't get when you are dealing with gravity. When you are laying on the table and your neck releases, you really want someone to take your head, to get that extension through the spine, because you can't do it for yourself. Some things you can't do for yourself. Debbie (Caplan) used to say that you need a muscle outside yourself. Muscles contracting (flexing) work with other muscles lengthening (extending.) The teacher's muscles are outside the student but connected to the student's muscles. As the teacher's muscles contract, they extend the student's muscles. The teacher provides the muscle outside that stimulates the release and extension of the student's muscles causing the traction that feels as though the spine muscles are lengthening.

Initially the students I worked on liked me to pull to provide that traction, but I learned that the student has to do the work, not me. Lengthening happens by itself. For example, if I am working with one hand under the mid-back and one hand under the shoulder blade, and I am widening I can feel my student release. I can then "catch" the movement with my top hand by following that release. Traction is then possible because I am widening as I follow my student's release. My top hand moves away from my bottom hand, and because spine or muscle is in my hand, it comes with me as my hand moves. If muscle is released, it will lengthen and widen (i.e., expand.) The resulting total inner expansion of the student is dependent on the quality of the traction given by the teacher, and the quality of the traction is dependent on the expertise of the teacher.

Basically, I use the same sequence on the table as I use for the chair. After freeing the neck and balancing the head, I work on freeing the legs, widening at the pelvis, legs away from the torso, torso away from legs. Once the legs are freely moveable in the hips joints, the torso can widen away from the legs. If the legs are not free, you can't really lengthen the torso, because the legs will always come with the torso.

I go along with the student releasing up and out through the torso. That is the way the muscles move. The release of the shoulders is aided by the three-dimensional expansion of the torso. If the torso is expanding, the shoulder girdle, which is attached, has to come with it. Sometimes you have to free the shoulder girdle before coming up through the ribs. One thing helps another. In turn the widening of the torso is helped by the release of the shoulders.

When I come up through the torso, I want the student to release up and out the arms – up and out the back – and down the arm. When the arm is free the energy flow is coming out the fingers, and the student is thinking down to the elbow and out the fingers. Energy is traveling through you. Energy doesn't have muscle, and it doesn't have bone. It's just a thought. You are moving energy.

We are very involved with doing things with our arms all our life. It is very hard to give up control. *Non-doing* is the non-doing of habit. Taking the arm over the head has nothing to do with the arm. With my hands I'm really not letting the student do what his habit would be in moving the arm. My hands say, "Hey, you don't have to do that." With the student's fingertips

leading, I can take his arm over his head. Fingertips can't actually lead, but the thought of a string leading the fingertips (like a puppet) helps the student inhibit initiating the movement with the shoulder.

Periodically I come back to the head, pelvis, and knees. My hands are either telling my student to inhibit or to let go in a specific direction. I start out with an idea of what direction I want the release to occur. I know what I want to accomplish and I have to figure out a way of putting my hands on my student that is least disturbing without contorting myself in the process.

### ***Breathing***

Breathing is a normal, natural function. There is no way we can stop breathing and still stay alive. We can help make the breathing process more efficient by helping people eliminate or change inefficient habits. Even with no emphasis on breathing, the Alexander Technique in itself will help by allowing greater ease in the range of movement in the rib cage. Knowledge of the normal process of the breathing mechanism and conscious control of this process as well as knowledge of any other techniques not antithetical to the Alexander Technique add to a person's capacity to change and can only enhance performance.

### ***Teaching Monkey***

Start by lengthening and coming up off the legs from behind the legs, so the legs are releasing out of the back and the arms also are coming out of the back. The totality of the torso is lengthening and widening. The knees drop forward away from the back, which is behind the legs. When you pivot on the hip joints in monkey, the legs stay forward of the torso while the pelvis which is part of the torso stays back. This way it is easier to maintain the front length that helps you keep the torso from collapsing.

### ***Walking***

I don't ask my beginning student to observe how he walks. I am not teaching him how to walk. He knows how to walk; he's been walking since he was plus or minus 12 months old. I am perhaps giving him new ideas to think about and use in his walking. If he is following a new agenda in use, he is inhibiting his old agenda and substituting the new without getting caught up in the need to do it right or even to know that he is inhibiting. Judy used to say that unless you can transfer the Technique into daily living you might as well forget it! Perfection is made for heaven.

### ***Flying***

*Flying* started with an "exercise" during a chair lesson. The aim was to inhibit lifting the shoulders prior to raising the arms while maintaining a widening through the shoulder girdle both in raising and in lowering the arms. The aim was not to hold the shoulder down, just to inhibit initiating the movement by lifting the shoulder.

The arms move out of the back and are free to move in the joint. Relaxing to take the arms down will pull everything down, so you don't want the student to relax the arms: the student is always in control and must inhibit the tendency to relax as the arms are coming down.

Other steps evolved out of complicating the choreography and the directions: From standing, have the student come down vertically in space by allowing the knees to bend (the knees bend out of the back) while maintaining the expanding torso that is coming off the legs, the back staying back and up, the arms floating up as the knees are bending and the arms floating down as the knees straighten. The movements of the arms up and down and the knees bending and straightening never reach a destination, never stop moving. The movement changes direction as the *up* flows into the *down* and vice versa. The arms are always going *up* as the knees bend and always coming *down* as the knees straighten. Gradually the movement speeds up until the student has to give up “being so careful to do it right.” Sometimes jumping will happen out of the speeding up of the movement, but that doesn’t always occur. It usually takes time and repeated experiences for that to happen. When it does, the jumping “does itself.”

The term *flying* came from a student who said it feels like flying. Experimenting with private students was the inspiration, and then I brought the same ideas to the training class. Flying deals with oppositions, inhibition, moving on the joints, being in the moment, and having fun but not relaxing. The student is in control at all times but not *doing*. That sounds paradoxical. It is! Alexander is full of paradox.

### ***Teacher Training***

How does one develop a unified curriculum for training teachers for a profession as individualistic as the Alexander Technique? As teacher trainers, we have a responsibility to pass on to the next generation of teachers the knowledge we have gleaned from past generations, solidified and added on to by us. All that knowledge helps each new teacher evolve a uniquely personal approach to the Alexander Technique. This sometimes elusive information has to be transmitted to our trainees so they can absorb and become one with the knowledge. Then, as best we can, we have to teach them how to transmit this information to their students.

Some people are born teachers and will instinctively understand how to teach. But most of us do not fit into this category, and we benefit as new teachers from the procedures and processes perfected over the years that we learned as trainees from our teachers. One doesn’t always have to rediscover the wheel for oneself. That is a very uneconomical way to approach learning. Procedures and processes that work will help the novice teacher feel more secure in what she is learning for herself and will help her to freely explore other possibilities.

Things don’t necessarily happen just because you have absorbed all the intricacies of the theories. You have to have a way of meaningfully transmitting what you know to your student trainee so that she in turn can transmit the knowledge meaningfully to her student. That is the dilemma facing us as teacher trainers.

The Alexander Technique truly is individualistic, but that doesn’t mean each teacher has to discover for himself *how* to transmit what he knows meaningfully to his students. The Technique cannot be epitomized by a mass of procedures, but the procedures and processes help to “define” in different ways what the Technique is. While each teacher’s concept of how to teach a procedure is his own modification of what he was taught, he is learning from those who preceded

him, who perhaps modified and polished what they were taught through interactions with their peers.

Training has to include more than theories. A knowledge of functional anatomy, both normal and pathological is essential, as well as some sense of the many problems that one is forced to deal with as one teaches. We have to keep up with the latest scientific discoveries that enhance our understanding of how our body-mind functions and include in our training new techniques that arise from this new knowledge. It is not so much that the Technique would be improved by the addition of other techniques, but that it would enhance these techniques

As we become skilled at dealing with certain problems, it would be useful to be able to share this cumulative knowledge with others so that new generations of teachers can benefit. Each generation can add to what is known. That is how the Alexander Technique keeps growing and expanding into the future.

As a practice the Alexander Technique is unique in itself. It is fundamental to every human endeavor and its unique integrity should be maintained. What keeps the Alexander Technique growing is the fertilization, nurturing and assimilation of all these diverse ways of transmitting its concepts of conscious control and non-doing.