

## Peggy Williams In Her Own Words

*The following excerpts are selected from a series of conversations with Peggy Williams on her experience of Alexander's work in his later years. It was vitally important to Peggy that you, the reader, understand that in sharing her thoughts and experiences she was not presuming to tell you how or what to think. Peggy often described her life as "...a life of learning, and not learning to be right either!" When she spoke about the Technique it was not to dictate - but to direct. In doing so she hoped that we would undertake for ourselves the discovery of what she had come to understand through over 50 years of learning and living close to Alexander's work.*

*-Nanette Walsh*

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Nanette Walsh: I have heard that FM said "Now I can give it to them whether they want it or not."

Peggy Williams: Why not? He had such skill in his hands and brain that even if the person was not co-operating as they should he was able to give them the experience that he wanted. He [FM] was learning and improving himself all the time, right up to his death when he was absolutely supreme. He never said 'My hands are perfect.' There was no sense of urgency in him he just went on expanding himself, as is shown when he was ill after the stroke and he came back working better than ever...He was always refining his work, using the minimum, the absolute minimum.

NW: Could you say more about what that 'experience' was that he wanted?

PEG: Well, just the balance of the whole head, neck, back, spine - a feeling of unity.

NW: So you think it was possible that he was able to by-pass a pupil's interference without needing their participation with regards to inhibition and direction?

PEG: Oh, well, not if they were madly interfering. He'd have to get a certain amount of stillness and cooperation. I mean, if a person is sitting there, moving their legs and fidgeting all the time, which some people did, you know! ... well, they've just got to stop doing what they're doing, or consciously doing...it's difficult to say what I mean. You can't ask them to stop doing what they're not conscious of doing. But you can ask them to stop what they're consciously doing...the grosser things. If you can persuade them to stop, then you've got something to start from. So there has to be a modicum of cooperation. I am sure he would get them to stop. He might even feign crossness, in order to make them realize that some cooperation was needed...to give them a prod, it was behavior unique to him in that present moment. I didn't know he was pretending to be cross with me and it did make me more alert and open. I don't think that everybody ought to do that at all, because it was a very special way of his and it's not for the ordinary people

NW: How else would he get them to stop?

PEG: He'd talk to them about the importance of being still to allow him to work. He would get them to a modicum of stillness, ... enough to build on that stillness.

NW: Do you use the word "stillness" instead of "inhibition"?

PEG: "Stillness" is inhibition! But it depends on whose stillness - some people mistake stillness for collapse. But that isn't stillness, that's collapse. It's an act. You are doing something with your body if you're collapsing, you're not leaving yourself in neutral.

NW: Or the opposite – forcing stillness on yourself as a kind of stiffening to be quiet or to hold yourself up. Would that be another mistaken idea of stillness?

PEG: Yes.

NW: If pupils start out collapsed what would you ask of them?

PEG: Well it depends on the person, the first thing I'd make sure is that they are not fixing the eyes and then the next thing probably I'd do is try to get their attention by talking about something else so they forget themselves.

NW: Would you ask anything of their thinking at that point?

PEG: Oh no, I shouldn't think that they would be capable of it! I would divert their attention from trying to be right.

NW: And then?

PEG: Well, whatever comes – whatever we could achieve.

NW: You give them a new experience?

PEG: You can't give an experience if a person is really collapsed, unless you want to haul them off and become a human crane - which is not very helpful to the teacher.

NW: Can you 'get it' now with your hands despite a student's interference?

PEG: Not if it is a gross interference. Of course people interfere all the time, but half of it is what you'd call almost subliminal. That, you can tackle. But if a person is sitting there, moving their head around, refusing to stop ... You just sort of say, well why are you coming for lessons?...But I can help a person even when they don't want help, and I can certainly help if I can stop the person fidgeting. Nobody can do it if they're moving all over the place and messing about. There has to be a quietness there, a stillness. I can help a person if they are leaving themselves alone. Not by trying to help them feel better. Alexander said, "Any fool can make someone feel better."

NW: Could you talk about the difference between helping someone “feel better” and helping someone as you first mentioned?

PEG: Some people have got such a bad sensory register that when you improve their conditions they feel worse. If they are willing to work and be still then you go on working. But it is not a dead stillness, it is an alert stillness. It is alive.

NW: You’ve cautioned against the danger of having hands without liveliness,...saying “not to do so little that there's no life in it.”

PEG: Direction I call it! Not just applied to the technique but direction in life, in living, in being.

NW: How did FM teach you to give directions?

PEG: He [FM] sort of gave us his knowledge and left it to us to work on ourselves as we thought best. I think that Alexander taught more this way towards the end, less with words. And some people think in words and some people think differently. I never think in words. I’ve got an idea in my head of what I want, through having the experience over and over again, from good teachers. And I allow what I understand to happen and not interfere with it. I think that words in a way rather interfere with the whole mechanism--overemphasizing what you have learned. It’s a question of having a good sensory appreciation, and if you don’t, never mind words, they are not going to be the answer. Repeating words in your mind like that can interfere with the process. It’s no good having words without explaining what they mean and associating the meaning of the words with what you want to happen. You’ve got to have the proper experience.

NW: In order to bring about a good sensory appreciation you have talked about reeducating a pupil’s sensory register, could you say more on this?

PEG: Originally I think most of us started off with what really what amounts to good use and through other people and habits and various things like that we just lose a natural thing.

NW: Could you say more about what you mean by reeducating your sensory register in contrast to how you might otherwise “feel your way” through something?

PEG: If you are feeling your way, you are losing your sensory register, you are trying to feel something that might be quite an erroneous conception, you are not letting the true thing happen, you are putting something there from your own mind. You are not being open.

NW: Could you address how you teach a pupil to be open to a new experience ?

PEG: You have to teach them [pupils] how to think so they can want the conditions to happen. Eventually they can help themselves when they are able to combine the new

experience they've had with thought and understanding and wishing and willing. However, a new pupil doesn't know what those conditions are....

NW: Could you say what you mean by conditions?

PEG: A person has to be still but alert... You've really got to explain what being still is, it's not doing nothing--because a lot of people think it is just going into a state of flop. The "wishing" is to stop you being floppy - and being alert instead... And looking out and seeing things around, and not fixing the eyes on one object or so that the eyes go out of focus - well the body does too - sort of the whole ... it goes dead, you lose your vitality of thought - all vitality that comes with alert thinking All they can do is leave themselves alone so that they can be open to receive a new experience. Alexander said you've got to give a person an experience, otherwise it is like telling a blind man what the color red is. He just can't know!

NW: When you talked about thought and understanding and wishing and willing, could you explain what you mean by "wishing and willing"?

PEG: Wishing and willing that you can be light and lengthened and widened and not in a state of collapse. You've got to want it and not just think of yourself as sort of a body there for something to be done to. You don't want to be a zombie, not just repeating words because you've been told to, but so that they mean something to you. Really the person has to want it ... "wishing and wanting".

NW: Did you change "willing" to "wanting" because it implies less end-gaining?

PEG: I hate the word "end-gain".

NW: Why?

PEG: Some people regard "end-gaining" as... they've got to sit like a monk otherwise they'll be end-gaining ... they sort of take it in the wrong way as being so completely neutral that they're not doing their part, or thinking their part.

NW: Is "wanting" a kind of directing?

PEG: Yes.

NW: So you would liken "wishing and wanting" to directing?

PEG: Yes. If they know what they want, and if you give them the experience of that - but on the other hand, they might misinterpret what you've given them, so they might want something wrong.

NW: And your hands pick that up as an interference?

PEG: Yes.

NW: Can you say what you mean by “thought and understanding”?

PEG: Well, “thought” is in putting your hands on --how you put them on--with direction. And then because of your direction--as long as the other person is quiet, or even if they’re not--you can glean a bit. This is how I work anyway, don’t say everyone does. Through your hands your brain is given an idea of where the interference mostly is, so that you can help to stop that in order to improve where your hands are.

NW: And the “understanding”....

PEG: ...Well, it comes through your hands to your brain.

NW: Do you have to be aware of what you’re doing...

PEG: You have to be aware all the time, you must be alert to be aware. If you’re not aware you can’t direct.

NW: I have noticed that you rarely use the word “awareness”. Yet is a word that I often hear spoken of along with inhibition and direction.

PEG: Well, some people aren’t aware! And you hopefully can reeducate them so they do become aware.

NW: Would you then say that the technique involves awareness, inhibition and direction with awareness being as important as inhibition and direction?

PEG: Yes of course. But, the three words are “inhibition, direction and awareness.” The words are that way round.

NW: Wouldn’t you put “awareness” first because it is difficult to change what you don’t know?

PEG: If you are not still you can’t receive new experiences. It’s the experience that helps you become aware!

NW: And if you can’t get to regular Alexander lessons...?

PEG: ...just lie on the floor and be still....And if you can’t lie on the floor just make the most of what you have. If you have had some experience of the technique, then you will be able to see that you are not pulling your head back and hopefully you’ll be able to stick to that.

NW: Would you say that the direction “head forward” could be interpreted as simply not pulling the head back?

PEG: Forward is not tilting the head back so that you are not stiffening and shortening in the back of the neck and also not pulling forward so that the chin is pressing in to the larynx. You can take the head back, I do it with my pupils so that if they want to look up skywards there's no reason that they shouldn't. There's no movement that is taboo as long as it is done with direction and inhibition... I don't like to use the word... as long as it is done with thought.

NW: Because inhibition is associated with repression?

PEG: It is anything but! It is about freedom. It's to facilitate movement!

NW: And being still?

PEG: It's allowing the small amount of release to happen, this is what I think of as being still: Being still but aware of the world around you.

NW: Some people would call that being conscious.

PEG: It is! That is what conscious control is about. That's my idea of it.

NW: At one point you said that the Alexander Technique gave you your life.

PEG: I mean that it enabled me to realize how much there was to life, and to get on with it.

NW: So the thing the technique gave you...?

PEG: Courage. The moment I started to have my lower back and didn't just feel completely all caved in, I started to have courage. And when my lower back used to go at the odd times then I'd revert back to my original state. So the two were actually associated in my mind.

*"I was really damaged when I started. I had a deep yearning to change. That's the most important thing; one's willing and wishing and yearning to change. That is why the technique is evolutionary because it gives you the chance....This must give hope to other people!"*