ExChange

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Volume 19, Number Two

Utilizing Support

In This Issue

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Cover Photo:

Thundafunda.com
"Autumn Colors"
The White Mountains, New Hampshire, USA
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From Co-Editor MaryJean Allen

It is my pleasure to assemble and edit this ExChange issue in order to support my Co-Editor of the ExChange: Kathy Privatt. Kathy was my Alexander Technique Training Sister at Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies, located in Greensboro, North Carolina, directed by Robin Gilmore. During those three wonderful years of training, Kathy Privatt was my roommate and true friend.

As Kathy continues to recover her full health from her recent diagnosis of breast cancer, I am so happy that she is beautifully utilizing all the support that is available to her.

Accordingly, I decided to entitle this issue *Utilizing Support*. The articles that the authors contributed also beautifully reflect this theme.

I would also like to heartily thank David Gorman, who has been extremely generous with his time and talents, making our new PDF format of the ExChange a success. Thanks for your support, David!

As a voice teacher, Body Mapping teacher, and now as a new Alexander Technique Teacher, I continuously think about the best ways to apply and teach the concept of *SUPPORT*.

What are the best ways we can utilize support?

What are the best ways to teach our students how to utilize support?

These are questions we are privileged to ask as Alexander Technique teachers, as Alexander Technique teacher-trainees, and as people interested in the Alexander Technique.

From This Chair

Jennifer Mizenko

Today I write to you all from the porch of the Assembly Hall at Chautauqua Park, in Boulder, CO. Alexander Technique International (ATI) has just completed its third Membership Council Meeting. I must report that this meeting was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life and was a true example of *Utilizing Support*.

This meeting was a living example of the principles of the F.M. Alexander Technique and upheld ATI's Mission Statement: "To embody the principles of the F.M. Alexander Technique in ATI's structure and means of operation." If you have never been to an ATI Annual General Meeting, we use a decision-making process called Formal Consensus. Over the course of the years ATI created a path to make the Formal Consensus Process specific to the work of ATI.

My tenure as Chair of ATI has been a tremendous learning experience. And part of this learning experience has been learning how to use and also trust the support available to me. Support from friends, family, ATI Board Members, Committee Chairs and the ATI Office.

Often, we all forget about the support around us and within us. When I became Chair of ATI I was given advice from a former Chair; "Delegate, delegate, delegate." At first I did not trust this advice. I didn't trust that work would get done or individuals would follow through with tasks.

Eventually, the enormity of the responsibility began to take its toll on me, and to take care of myself I was forced to relinquish control and trust, as well as utilize the support around me.

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From This Chair

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When I finally allowed the weight of the responsibilities to shift to the appropriate support systems a miracle happened . . . it worked!!! And when the members gathered in today's meeting allowed and trusted the whole group to support the process, a path was revealed toward consensus, which will open up the future for ATI.

When we take on more than we need, we add an extra burden to our physical structure, our hearts and our minds.

There is a sign here at Chautauqua that says School of Mind, Heart and Body. Being Chair of ATI has definitely been a school of Mind, Heart and Body and I have truly learned in every way what it means to Utilize Support.

To the ATI and Alexander Technique community at large, thanks for teaching me to use the support that is available to me.

From this Chair,

Jennifer Mizenko, Chair ATI 2007-2011

We Want Your Submissions for the February ExChange!

Submissions for the February issue due by January 15, 2011

Please share the wealth of your Alexander Technique experiences from your life, your teaching, or your learning by writing an article, essay, book review, poem, etc., and submitting to the *ExChange*.

Please email your article to:

kathy.privatt@lawrence.edu

Instructions

1. Email your article in a MS word or plain text format. (not pdf)
2. Important: please do not use text boxes in the article.
3. If you use pictures or graphics in your article, please attach each picture or graphic to your email.
4. Please put your article in the body of your email, in case the attachment becomes corrupted via email.
5. Include a brief biography, and attach a clear photo of yourself.

Thank you!

Please Submit the Following:

Articles

We accept articles of varying length and on a variety of topics.

Essays

Put your experiences, teaching, or research into essay form to share with your Alexander Technique colleagues.

Book, DVD, Video, or CD Reviews

Please describe what these sources offer.

Poetry, Art, or Photography

All art forms are welcome, especially if relevant to Alexander Technique.

Workshop Experiences

Write a brief description of an insight or exercise from a workshop or training session you attended.

Humor

Please share any humorous moments pertaining to Alexander Technique.

Submissions for the February issue due by January 15, 2011

Alexander Technique Teacher Vacancy

The Hayes School of Music at Appalachian State University invites applications for a non-tenure-track, benefits eligible, nine-month faculty position as ¾-time instructor of Alexander Technique at the rank of Lecturer beginning July 1, 2012. The requirements for the position are a bachelor's degree and significant experience as an instructor of Alexander Technique. A master's degree and Alexander Technique certification are preferred. Instructional duties will include teaching sections of Alexander Technique to Music majors. Applicants must send a complete application consisting of a letter of interest; a current vita; unofficial transcripts; and the names, addresses, and contact information of at least three references to:

Chair, Alexander Technique Search Committee
Appalachian State University
Hayes School of Music
ASU Box 32096
Boone, NC 28608-2115

Electronic applications will not be accepted. Review of complete applications will begin on December 5, 2011, and will continue until the position is filled.

Any offer of employment to a successful candidate will be conditioned upon the University's receipt of a satisfactory criminal background report.

AA/EEO Employer

For more information, please visit
http://www.hrs.appstate.edu/employment/epa-jobs/492

Upcoming Winter Workshops and Events

Please click on the following links to view 2011-2012 Workshops and other events.

ATI Notice Board of Workshops and Ongoing Events
http://www.ati-net.com/atiwshop.php

AmSAT Classes and Events
http://www.amsatonline.org/classes-events

Columbus, Ohio December 27-31, 2011
http://alexanderworkshops.com/OO04pages/AboutWorkshop.html

Malibu, California Dec. 27, 2011 - Jan. 1, 2012
http://alexandertechniqueworkshops.com/

Boca Raton, Florida February 11-15, 2012
meadandrews@aol.com

Compassionate Lessons

By Robert Lada

Some time ago, I found myself in my ophthalmologist's office with a problem with one of my retinas. Of course, being a very important doctor, he relied on an assistant to prep me before he, the bigwig, walked into the examining room. The assistant explained what was going to happen during the exam and what the side effects might be from the drops that would be put into my eyes. She answered my questions and made sure I was not only comfortable, but understood everything that was going to happen. Eventually the main man arrived. His exam was competent and quick, and he recommended a course of action, which proved to be effective.

Reflecting on this experience later, to my surprise I realized I preferred the assistant's approach, even though she was at the start of her career with much, much less experience than the doctor I had come to see. Wasn't it possible to be both proficient and caring? What kind of training would I offer my doctor to improve the care he was giving to his patients? What follow are the exercises I have found to address this gap between technical skill and care. I call them Compassion Exercises and use their principles when teaching lessons and classes. We bring our selves, our eyes, our heads, and our hearts to lessons. I want to share and explore some of the approaches I use to uncover a nurturing space for both teacher and student.

My feeling is that compassion is inherent in us all, potentially informing all of our thoughts and actions. It is certainly a subject others have written about and the consensus is that compassion can be the basis for richer interpersonal interactions. As human beings we can learn to experience ourselves compassionately, to see the whole beings we are when interference falls away without losing our identity. As Alexander Technique teachers, we can explore kinesthetically what it means to teach with compassion. We can touch our students compassionately, taking them in the direction they want to go, even if they don’t realize it yet.

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Compassionate Lessons

By Robert Lada

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Definitions

Compassion is an active choice to want, with others and for others, the alleviation of their suffering. It is a sustained intention to seek the good in others and is characterized by such things as empathy, sympathy, patience, tolerance and understanding. We can say that compassion is gentle concern, a good-hearted activity, a combination of empathy and understanding.

Empathy is seeing the world through the other person's eyes, with patience and sincerity. To have empathy, one feels another's pain. It is walking along beside her as she is and observing her without judgment. A person's capacity for empathy allows him to plan for the future and relate to his future self. Importantly, the ability to relate to another helps you relate to self.

With sympathy, one feels sorry for another's plight, yet remains relatively distant. In common usage, sympathy is usually making known one's understanding of another's unhappiness or suffering, especially when it is grief. One feels empathy when one has "been there" and sympathy when one hasn't.

Compassion Exercises

The following exercises are in no particular order. Each one is independent of the others and can be tried without reference to the rest. By that same token each person's experience with any one of them will be individual. So too are the possibilities. Each exercise will have a section in *italics*, which states the detailed steps in the exercise. The rest of the text will be supporting commentary.

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Compassionate Lessons

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Exercise 1: Playing with Perception

This exercise is designed to acquaint you with how your awareness can change depending on context. It explores how a person perceives things, the sense of the surrounding space, as well as the limits and colors of awareness. This is most easily a group exercise, but individuals can try it if they are prepared to use their imagination!

> *Begin by walking around in the space where you all have gathered.*
>
> *Walking about normally in the room, what is my baseline awareness?*
>
> *What* am *I thinking, how am I feeling, what parts of the world and myself am I aware of? Etc.*
>
> *When I begin to greet and acknowledge others, how does this baseline change?*
>
> *When I think of myself as an Alexander teacher, how does this baseline change?*
>
> *When meeting a student, what happens to my perception?*
>
> *When thinking of compassion, what changes?*

Exercise 2: I, too, am that

This is a deceptively simple exercise, but is quite demanding for both teacher and student.

> *Begin a lesson. Every time either the teacher or the student notices something about the other and remarks on it, also add the phrase "I, too, am that"*

Along with honing listening and narrative skills, this exercise gives a teacher a chance to connect more profoundly and completely with the student while still retaining her own separate personality. In my experience, fuller contact with a student can result in a blurring of personal boundaries, which is unhealthy. This exercise can clarify these matters for you.

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Exercise 3: Higher Creative Self

This is an adaption of work Penny O'Connor does in London. It involves a role-playing exercise where you, the reader, act as a teacher.

> *Begin by teaching a part of a lesson, perhaps working with a chair, as you would normally do it. Then, with another particular AT teacher in mind, teach the same material as s/he would do it. Play with this for a while, switching between the two roles, and see if you can begin to get a feel for what's happening when you play the role of yourself.*
>
> *Next, cease switching between the two roles and see what it's like to become yourself. Then, step bravely into the unknown and drop the role of yourself, and (with the assistance of another teacher if you're in a training situation), teach that same material. The person who shows up at that moment is, to my mind, the one who abides for you across all time, your higher creative self. See if you can switch between playing the role of yourself and letting your higher creative self emerge as you continue to teach.*

This is quite a deep exercise. The closest description of this might be that it feels like the difference between your speaking voice (your normal role) and your singing voice (higher creative self).

Exercise 4: The Little Engine that Couldn't

All too often frustration can override compassion in group teaching situations and the frustration becomes detrimental to everyone involved, even if they didn't realize it at the time.

> *There are potentially three different roles in this exercise. You play the role of a student who earnestly is trying to learn something particular, but just can't seem to get it no matter what the teacher does. A second role is that of the teacher, trying to teach you the concept. If it's a group situation, the rest of the group would represent the third role that of offering advice to both the teacher and the student.*

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Compassionate Lessons

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Exercise 4: The Little Engine that Couldn't (continued)

> *The exercise is simple. The teacher will try to get a concept across to you the student, and despite your best efforts you still mess it up.*

The group and the person in the teacher role can explore what it's like to be compassionate under difficult circumstances. Can the teacher meet the student where she is, but not join in her self-defeating habits?

A variation of this exercise is where you, the student, rather than trying hard and falling short, has strong ideas about the concept and doesn't want to hear anything the teacher is saying. Can the teacher find an empathetic response that will show you the way to turn "no" into "yes?" or will the teacher try to drive home an agenda?

Exercise 5: Shape Matching

In this exercise, you actually look for a problem that the student is having, but respond to it a little differently.

> *With your hands on your student, sense a place where she is having difficulties. Rather than fixing her problem, get a sense of the shape that she has assumed because of this problem. It's quite likely a static shape, but there could be movement in it. At any rate, first synchronize with the rhythm of her breathing. Once you've done that, assume the same shape, so that you're living her issue as well as you can. Then, apply your knowledge of the Alexander Technique in yourself and see what happens to that shape and subsequently how your student responds.*

Often students are holding and stiff because they don't know what else to do. In this exercise, you use empathy to respect someone else's journey and for an interlude, accompany them on that journey. You may find that you're able to facilitate giving a voice to that part of the student that wants to communicate through this approach.

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Compassionate Lessons

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Exercise 6: Heart Permeated Seeing

If you have a group, get a partner, as this is a two-person exercise.

> *For this one, be seated or standing, not too close to each other. We'll be going through a sequence of steps oriented about vision.*
>
> *First, look at your partner, seeing what you see for a bit and then look away.*
>
> *Next, look at your partner again, and recognize that you are looking through a palpable space, and then look away.*
>
> *Next, look at your partner again through that space, and note more exactly where s/he is, perhaps in front of a grey wall, to the side of a decorated table, etc. etc., and then look away.*
>
> *Next, repeat the same, and specifically realize that this is shared space and that you're both in the same space, and then look away.*
>
> *Next, repeat, and do whatever works to have your heart influence what you see. It can be your heart supplying the blood that makes this vision possible, it may be the commonality between heart cells and brain cells, it may be your heart allowing your vision to nestle while it's being created, however this plays out for you.*
>
> *Next, within all of this and as a part of it, bring the ease and movement of the relation between your head, spine, and torso to the forefront of your consciousness by whichever means that you use and see what happens.*
>
> *Finally, begin to exchange work with your partner and explore.*

In my experience, when the freeing response is explicitly invoked, something quite striking happens, but I don't really have any language for it. I find that my thoughts and words become richer and feel that I do a much better job of communicating verbally with my student.

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Compassionate Lessons

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Exercise 7: Head, Heart, and Gut

My own feeling is that we can do better when all parts of the nervous system are involved in our lessons. The gut has a significant component (enteric nervous system) that is part of the autonomic nervous system, but is separate from parts that affect the heart (sympathetic and parasympathetic).

> *Working with both yourself and your student, sense the interaction between head, heart, and gut and try to have them line up with each other so that this communication is the richest. It might be easier to sense the head and heart first, and then bring in the gut. You may begin to feel three separate channels that are dancing with each other.*

Bringing the gut into this exercise, explicitly gives access to more primitive emotions in my experience. My friends that work with chakras recommend going from the bottom to the top and vice-versa, but I've never had any luck tapping into that.

Exercise 8: Compliments

> *Set up in pairs. The teacher, after working with the student for a bit, gives the student a compliment verbally about what s/he did. The student's job is to receive the compliment, notice where it registers kinesthetically, and whether it moves once having landed. The student then gives the teacher a compliment and the teacher follows the same process. Keep repeating until both teacher and student are comfortable with the movement of the compliment in the student. Hopefully, the same thing will happen with the teacher as s/he gives the compliment.*
>
> *Then, do a longer lesson with the teacher's central purpose being to compliment the student when observing anything. The compliments can be silent.*

This is another exercise where there is a good deal more than meets the eye. The more I emphasize this approach, the better results I get.

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Compassionate Lessons

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Exercise 9: Interruptions

When I speak, I get interrupted quite often. I used to get quite annoyed when it happened, and then got annoyed at myself for being annoyed. Having been interrupted, I found myself commenting on the interruption rather than saying what I had to say. By doing this, I undercut my message when I was finally able to speak. I started observing more closely and I noticed the same phenomenon when others were interrupted as well. After a few months, I was able to articulate my goal in this endeavor:

I wanted to be able to be just as committed to completing my thought as not when speaking, which to me meant trying to be in monkey with my speech.

Nice goal, no luck. I tried using traditional AT methods to cope with this, but nothing really worked out. I kept at it however, and when I got nowhere with the effort, I eventually gave up fully and completely. At that moment, an image of the moon shining on a lake came to me and this exercise was born.

> *When you speak, or take any other action, let your heart illuminate all your movements so that the depth and richness of your action is visible to you.*

This attitude, though it's stated quite simply, has deeply changed the way I regard inhibition. It peeled back a layer of end-gaining, especially around speaking, and I have found, subsequently, that when I do say something, my speech more completely expresses the feelings and thoughts I am trying to communicate. It has been my path to an ongoing, moment-to-moment life of inhibition.

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Compassionate Lessons

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Exercise 10: Creative Role Playing

Here are just some ideas for situations that would evoke compassion that I'm mulling that might turn into exercises, which you can add to your list.

- *Work with someone whose eyes are closed so that they're quite dependent on you*.
- *Work with someone as though it's the very last time that you'll be with them*
- *Work with someone who is the tip of the iceberg. You're familiar with what you're usually aware of, but try to tease out things from other worldviews built from values, beliefs, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, socioeconomic class, age, gender, genetic factors, verbal and nonverbal communication cues*
- *Weave the phrases "thank you" and "I'm sorry" into your lessons. If you get the chance, look up the text of the Australian government's apology to its aboriginal population and see how it influences you.*

Conclusion

Are we born compassionate? I believe so, even though this may become muted as we become adults. I hope these exercises will light the way for you to make compassionate behavior more and more part of your daily life.

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Compassionate Lessons

By Robert Lada

Continued . . .

In closing, I would like to leave you with a poem from the American Southwest.

Take care when you speak in judgment.
Words are powerful weapons that can cause many tragedies.
Never make a person look a fool with your tongue.
Never make a person look small with your big mouth.
A hard word, a sharp word can burn a long time,
Deep in the heart, leaving a scar.
Accept that others think differently,
Feel differently, speak differently.
Be mild and healing with your words.
Words should be lights.
Words should be calm, bring people together, bring peace.
When words are weapons
People face each other like enemies.
Life is too short and the world is too tiny to turn it into a battlefield.

~ Traditional Hopi Saying

My thanks to:

Jane Axelrod, Ariel Axelrod-Hahn, Jane Bick, Joan FitzGerald, and Marilyn Stern

Bob Lada is a professor at Berklee School of Music in Boston and teaches at the Alexander Technique Center of Cambridge, Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies, American Repertory Theater, and Harvard Extension School. He also maintains a private practice in Cambridge, MA. Bob has taught workshops throughout the USA and Europe and is a charter member of Alexander Technique International. Bob's background is in athletics and analytics, and he looks at the Technique as a tremendous aid in getting out of one's way in performance situations so that creativity and skill can come through. His perspective on AT is to take all the energy that you use to keep yourself upright and transform it into something that's available for your creativity. He is currently working on videos about the Technique which will be posted on his website: http://www.rllalex.com/ Email: rllalex@comcast.net

Performing With Ease, Part Three

A Look at Resistance

By Rob Falvo

The Alexander Technique can be a catalyst for understanding who we are. By observing body tension, we can discover how our minds behave and begin to discover our fears, belief systems, and unconscious agendas. As long as there is an agenda, there is resistance and interference to the flow of life. When we notice these conditions, there is a possibility that tension will drop away and life will become easier, and silence or stillness can be observed at that moment.

Alexander Technique is practical play; excess tension can be seen directly, no imagination needed, no logical mind necessary (these qualities can actually get in the way), just openness and interest to see what is going on in your body and mind. When this happens, creativity is in full bloom without trying to be creative. Unlike philosophical discourses, which can be interesting and fun, this understanding comes out of direct experience without being argued or debated. It is either seen or not— that's it.

Kristnamurti, the world teacher, wrote: "Understanding is not an intellectual process. Acquiring knowledge about yourself and learning about yourself are two different things, for the knowledge you accumulate about yourself is always of the past, and a mind that is burdened with the past is a sorrowful mind. Learning about yourself is not like learning a language or a technology or a science—then you obviously have to accumulate and remember; it would be absurd to begin all over again—but in the psychological field, learning about yourself is always in the present and knowledge is always in the past, and as most of us live in the past and are satisfied with the past, knowledge becomes extraordinarily important to us. That is why we worship the erudite, the clever, the cunning. But if you are learning all the time, learning every minute, learning by watching and listening, learning by seeing and doing, then you will find that learning is a constant movement without the past."[1]

What does this have to do with playing percussion? When tension is seen directly and is let go, movement on any instrument becomes easy and fluid, and performing becomes virtuosic. Whenever tension is not seen, resistance occurs and the body contracts. We are no longer free, and it is like we are driving with our brakes on.

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A Look at Resistance

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Questions might come up in our minds: Can I just get through this piece without stopping? Can I just make it to the end without any pain? Can I just make it to the end without needing to slow down? Any or all of these judgments might surface as we are performing, and at that moment the body begins pulling in and shortening. The shoulders come forward and move closer to the ears. The neck shortens into the torso and the chin rises up as the back neck muscles contract. The back shortens by compressing the vertebrae in any number of ways. The hips push forward while the knees and ankles lock.

Here are some practical movement questions to ask yourself while performing on percussion instruments.

Keyboard percussion: When moving up or down the instrument, are your hips and knees locked as you take several steps, or are you easy in your hips and knees while you take a step or glide, allowing free motion to the end of the passage? While you are reading music and performing on the instrument, are you staring and tensing your neck to see the music or are you letting the music come to you, letting your eyes be easy and your neck free?

Timpani: When sitting on the stool, are you sitting on your sit bones, or sitting on your tailbone or thighbone? When you are sitting and moving from one drum to the next, are you moving from your hips or from your chest (thus tightening your hips and tensing your body)? When pedaling, are you moving your legs from your hip joints (moving easily), or are you pushing the pedals from your ankles, straining your legs to get to the next pitch?

Drumset: Are your arms moving from the area where your collarbone connects with your sternum (sternoclavicular joint)? When this happens your whole body is free and easy to move, and your arms will be supported. Are you moving forward from your hip joints when you need to reach for a cymbal or tom-tom so that your arms are free and flexible (like octopus arms) rather than collapsing in your chest—forcing your breath to be shallow and confined?

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Snare drum: Is your neck easy when you look down at the drum or music? When moving your head, are you moving from the top joint found in back of the nose and between your ears? Are your shoulders light, elbows flexible, and wrists easy? Are you aware of your fingers and how you move them? When standing, are your hips, knees, and ankles easy?

Crash cymbals: Are you holding your breath while you crash the cymbals? Are your shoulders raised up (tension), or are you using only what is necessary to play? Are your knees and ankles locked, thinking that you need to lock them in order to crash the cymbals?

Tambourine: To play shake rolls takes a lot of muscle tone in the arms and wrists. Are you locked in your shoulder area, thus creating more stress on your fingers and wrists, or is the movement supported throughout your whole body in order to not misuse the small muscles of your fingers and wrists?

Triangle: While you are holding the triangle up in performance, is the shoulder that is holding the triangle raised up closer to your ear or is it easy, lengthened out from your body and resting on your rib cage? How about your other shoulder—is it tense while you strike the triangle, or are you supporting the movement of your fingers and wrists with your whole body as you strike it?

Bass drum: When you strike the bass drum, are you holding your breath, or are you breathing naturally without restriction in the body so that the breath is easily flowing? Are you playing just with your wrists, or using your whole arm to play, allowing the wrists to move more easily?

Multiple setup: While moving from one instrument to another are you aware of how you are moving from your neck to your toes, or are you more concentrated on getting all the notes and stick changes, thus tensing your body to do so?

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Performing With Ease, Part Three

A Look at Resistance

By Rob Falvo

Continued . . .

What gets in the way of moving with ease? *Trying* to get it right gets in the way. This might seem off base or paradoxical, but it is true. Have you ever *tried* to be easy? Or, better yet, *tried* to lose your car keys? Or tried *not* to think of pink elephants? Whenever you are determined to get it right, there will be excess tension in the body. Do not take my word for it; see for yourself.

In one sense, this work is actually much easier than any intellectual understanding that deals directly with learning information. Your mind, which is conditioned, will always think about things through a colored lens and not see things as they are. "Miracles" happen when observation occurs without interference from the mind. Change occurs without wanting it to occur.

Confused? Well, it is only confusing because we have been conditioned to think differently. Once the conditioning is noticed and dropped, movement is seen clearly and life becomes easier.

Most of us, however, do not want to face the fact that we are performing with excess tension. Fear comes into play here and we do not want to discuss it. Who plays with excess tension? Those people who deny their fear or resistance will try to keep their fears to themselves in hopes that nobody finds out. Those who will benefit from this work are those who are open, interested, sincere, and willing to look at themselves completely.

Those who can take notice of their habitual patterns of movement (excess tension) have a chance to perform with ease (least amount of tension necessary to perform whatever they are performing). Some performers know—really know without any doubt—how easy it can be. And the big secret is that it is there for everyone.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you will be the fastest player in the West. We all have limits based on physical abilities and programming, but the "kicker" is that nobody (including you) knows what those limits really are-so why bother asking the question. Better to ask: What habits and conditions do I bring to each playing situation? What do I notice about myself while I am playing?

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Performing With Ease, Part Three

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Continued . . .

When we are willing to be truthful with ourselves and take a good look, there is freedom. We have been taught that in order to "make it" we need to try hard. The question that comes up for me is: "Make what?" We are just adding on all the things we heard and believed to be true and now find ourselves moving with tension.

You can begin to take a look at what is really happening as you are practicing and performing, and you might be surprised at what you see. Remember that this work is about understanding the inner self (mind) by noticing the outer self (body). Students typically say that they can notice the excess tension in their bodies but cannot let it go. This happens when students are more interested in getting to the end of the piece than really paying attention to the process. This is what F.M. Alexander called "end gaining," and it is what we all learned how to do really well.

Knowledge can be used just to show off one's intelligence rather than to enlighten an experience. As I mentioned before, knowledge (information) can actually get in the way. It distracts from really seeing what is happening because information can add to your mind and veil observation. We try to figure it out, get it right, and sometimes show off to other people. We are always end gaining when we are using our minds in this fashion.

Understanding or being aware is different. It is clear seeing, which excludes *trying* to get it, or trying to fix the "problem." Situations can be seen clearly, and instead of adding information to "correct," there is a letting go of preconceived notions and judgments of good/ bad, better/worse, and right/wrong. There is a dropping away of beliefs.

Resistance or tension actually is not a "bad" thing. It is what allows life to have direction, growth, and movement. The heart pumps using tension and release to allow blood to move throughout the body. Muscles also work using tension and release to get you from one place to another. There is also nothing wrong with having excess tension. It is part of the human condition, but our tendency is to think there is something wrong and that there is something to get rid of and therefore resist. Trying to get rid of tension becomes distracting.

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Performing With Ease, Part Three: A Look at Resistance

Continued . . .

By Rob Falvo

Distraction is when we identify with a thought that takes us away from an activity like reading music. When thoughts occur (as they typically do) and are identified with (meaning that there is interest in the thought), the thought pulls us in another direction, and the focus on the music and performance is not there.

Without distraction, there is a connection to the music in such a way that communication to the audience is free and easy; the audience will respond with the same openness and connection to the performance. The musician becomes a catalyst for the audience to sense life-affirming energy. It is this connection that everyone craves and enjoys as an audience member or artist.

In conclusion, the Alexander Technique is not really a technique at all. A technique is a system or method to acquire some kind of skill. Thinking of it as a technique fosters the thought that there is something to get right— something to master. When observed, tension is added on to what is natural and easy body movement, so how can you master something that you have already? The balanced movement came before the layering of interference or body tension.

This does not mean that seeing a teacher of the Alexander Technique is not recommended or necessary. We are all the same primarily and cannot objectively see all that teachers might be able to see. A teacher of the Alexander Technique can be a mirror for you to get to know your habits so that you can begin to see for yourself the quality of your movement.

ENDNOTE

1. Kristnamurti, J. *Freedom From the Known.* San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1969. pp. 22–23.

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Rob Falvo is a professor of percussion at Appalachian State University, where he heads the percussion department. In 2007, he graduated from the Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies – North Carolina Teacher Training Program and became a certified teaching member of Alexander Technique International. Falvo is a member of the Philidor Percussion Group and has performed with many orchestras and chamber groups based in North Carolina and New York. He earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Manhattan School of Music. He can be reached at: falvorj@appstate.edu

Less Effort, More Ease

By Constance Clare-Newman

When I teach the Alexander Technique to an actor, the student and I choose which aspect of the work to focus on.

The most common starting point is teaching the student how to come to a balanced neutral. Not too much tension, and not too little. Just the right amount of tension creates a lively, dynamic state of being.

Cultivating this dynamic neutral usually means that the student needs to "relax" some parts of herself and enliven other parts. Most people have habits and patterns of posture, movement, gesture, breath and voice that are out of balance.

As the student and I explore the student's "postural set" we find out where the bones are mis-aligned and where the muscles, tendons and ligaments can release out of either tightening or collapsing. We look in the mirror to see the postural set and how it changes with my hands-on guidance. As muscles release into length and lively tone, the bones find a more efficient balance. It's typical for students to feel "weird" or like they are almost falling forward when they come out of their habitual postural pattern. Often when I ask about that feeling, it's a "good weird" or a "floaty falling" sensation.

The use of hands is one way that an Alexander lesson is different from other methods or techniques in actor training. As the student learns to refine her kinesthetic and proprioceptive (inner) senses, she is able to work with the principles on her own. But at first the teacher's hands help the student understand the teacher's verbal guidance, and help her actually experience her own proprioceptive sensations.

As students progress, we work on releasing excess tension in action. Here's a typical example: Mark is learning a role that requires anger and upset. As Mark goes over his lines for the first time in his Alexander lesson, he pushes his face forward and contracts his jaw and neck muscles. He is over-acting because he is over-efforting. His lines are strong enough; he doesn't need the extra tension. The tension causes his voice to rise. The tension in his face and jaw make his expression look forced. I suggest that he try the lines while staying in a more neutral state, as I use my hands to help him notice what he is doing muscularly with his neck and jaw. I suggest that he let the lines evoke some of that anger in him, but not force it.

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Continued . . .

This time, Mark's voice is fuller; he becomes more intimidating as he retains his stature and his strength without contracting. Dynamic tension is there, but it is there in the right amount.

Another common Alexander lesson is in the realm of excess preparation before an activity. Before speaking or moving, actors will often "prepare" themselves by contracting and "getting ready"—thereby coming out of their neutral state.

Marla is working on a new monologue. Marla begins from a dynamic neutral state of being ready for action, but whenever Marla starts to speak, the area just under her skull at the top of her neck contracts. As I work with Marla, I put my hands gently on the back of her neck, where most people have excess tension. My hands helps her to notice when the muscles contract. Marla practices not tensing as she begins to speak. She continues to notice the area under her skull and can begin feel it tense even when my hands are not there.

I have her practice speaking without any concern for what her words mean. She counts to ten. Marla needs to soften and slow down so much that she feels like she is slurring, but we get her to make sounds without activating those necks muscles. I then have her practice normal conversation. She slows down to about 70% of her normal speaking pace, and I encourage her to allow her skull to be mobile, as her neck remains free of extra tension as she speaks. When her neck muscles are too tense, her skull won't move. When she has released some of the tension, she lets her head move freely.

When we progress to speaking her lines, Marla once again goes back to tensing her neck. And now she adds a new habit—she takes a short, quick breath each time she begins.

We go back to not-tensing, and not-preparing, and this time we bring in not-gasping before the speaking. Because we've now been working on releasing tension while speaking, working with the breath is easier. As Marla practices not adding the extra effort of the quick intake, she continues to allow her head to float easily, her neck muscles to be long and lively, her jaw to be easy and mobile. It is a lot to think about! Changing ingrained habits takes time, but more than that, it takes awareness and clarity of intention.

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Continued . . .

Marla now can speak her lines without excess tension, and her whole state of being shows the change. Her voice is clear and not rushed or raised. The lack of excess tension and effort shows in her spontaneous choice to move with her lines, which excites her. With more openness, she feels a fuller expression and more freedom as she explores her role.

Working with an actor over a longer time in individual sessions, or over several semesters of a Directed Study, allows for a deep and more intimate relationship. The student will sometimes share how past history of abuse or trauma affects them in their acting. In Stephanie's case, we explore how her habits of dissociation during stress can keep her from staying in character and/or being able to respond positively to constructive feedback or direction.

For many victims of long-term and/or severe abuse, dissociation is a survival skill that helped protect them from being fully present during the abuse. By "leaving the body," the victim could "check out" and then "come back" when it was safer. At the time, dissociation was an important survival strategy. But after the fact, and especially over years, dissociation does not allow for healing or processing the trauma. And it interferes with a person living to the fullest.

As a survivor of abuse proceeds through life, particular situations or stimuli trigger the habitual reaction of dissociation.

When Stephanie is in a role that is (subconsciously) scary to her, or is working with another actor who is (subconsciously) threatening to her, or is asked by a teacher or director to "feel" something outside her comfort zone, she sometimes goes into a dissociative state. She is therefore unable to respond appropriately.

In Alexander Technique lessons, we work with these issues on many levels. The first is to become aware of when dissociation occurs. When Stephanie notices that she can't respond appropriately to a situation, she brings her attention to her body. She notices a lack of sensory feeling in her body. Or she may notice her breath is restricted or that her brain seems not to function as "normal."

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Less Effort, More Ease

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Continued . . .

Then we practice bringing the internal senses of proprioception into awareness at will. Practicing sensory awareness during times of relaxation and comfort, and then in daily life and common activities, can build the capacity to practice sensing and feeling in more challenging moments.

Next, we practice breathing fully, creating choices in *how* to breath. For instance, the Alexander "Whispered Ah" exercise extends the exhale and allows the inhale to come in without gasping (or "taking it in"), which can tighten the throat. The "Whispered Ah" also quiets the nervous system.

We practice noticing when and how particular people trigger an automatic reaction of fear or anxiety. We discover how to meet that person's energy with clarity and balance, rather than shrinking and protecting and tightening into tension, or even dissociation.

Then we practice striking a balance between "too much" and "not enough" tension in posture and movement. This helps us to practice appropriate connection with others energetically and emotionally.

The mind-body work of the Alexander Technique teaches Stephanie life strategy skills that are immediately beneficial to her acting and enhance her overall capacity to work more fully with her talents.

Constance Clare-Newman is certified by the American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT). Constance completed a three-year Alexander training program in San Francisco with Frank Ottiwell, (1800 hours of study) and has since helped hundreds of students bring less effort and more ease into their activities. With a first career in training dressage horses and riders and a second career in performing and teaching modern dance, she is well acquainted with the needs of athletes and performers. She recovered from chronic back pain and injuries with the help of the Alexander Technique. Constance has a private practice in Oakland and San Francisco, teaches classes for actors at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco and gives specialized workshops for equestrians, actors, musicians, and for employees in the workplace. To view Constance Clare's website, click on this link: http://www.constanceclare.com/

Teacher Trainee Contribution:

The Summer of New Directions

By Petrea Warneck

Startle, transition and re-direction: these three powerful words became very meaningful to me this past year.

Enormous changes in my life were precipitated by the unexpected near-fatal illness of my husband, Diether, in July of last year, 2010. Robin Gilmore, my AT teacher and director of Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies, where I am a teacher in training, refers to Diether as having nine lives! He did truly overcome huge odds – and hence the transition began: a year of healing, reconditioning and re-direction. It became obvious to me early on that self care and staying attuned to my own Use would be essential in Diether's rehabilitation and return to total health. Thanks to my AT training and the many incredible AT colleagues in my life, the transition began and with it came healing and re-education for both Diether and for me. Diether, always my staunch supporter in everything I undertake, began to take even greater interest in my Alexander study and, consequently, in the Alexander work altogether. During those weeks and months of reconditioning, he read several of my AT books – including at least one of FM's own infamous reads! The culmination of our transitional year and Diether's curiosity brought us to Seven Oaks Alexander Technique Workshop – together! It was there, at Seven Oaks, that Diether became an Alexander Technique "newbie"!

I have to admit I was slightly hesitant about bringing Diether to an AT workshop! In spite of the fact that he fully endorses my training and embraces the Alexander concepts, I was not sure that the moment-to-moment doings (or rather non-doings) of an Alexander workshop would be the right thing for my overtly energetic, beloved skeptic!

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Teacher Trainee Contribution:

The Summer of New Directions

By Petrea Warneck

Continued . . .

Veteran Alexander Technique Teachers Jan Baty, Meade Andrews and Dale Beaver were true wonders in bringing Diether into our circle. Within moments Diether was integrated and involved, absorbed and convinced. I could let go of my reticence and let this good work speak for itself. Re-direction began for both of us and since the wonderful week at Seven Oaks, Diether and I partner in yet another exciting aspect of our lives. The world of the Alexander Technique and all that it offers is even more alive in our home now, and Diether now has his own personal experience and enthusiasm about this magnificent work.

As I embark on my third year as a teacher in training at Robin Gilmore's School, Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies, I begin the year with renewed energy and new direction as a result of the richness of that week at Seven Oaks with Diether and my AT colleagues. The world is a different place compared with last year at this time!

Wishing you a happy autumn filled with beautiful Use,

Petrea Warneck

Petrea Warneck, oboist performs extensively throughout the Carolinas as an orchestral and chamber musician. She is a member of South Carolina Philharmonic and often performs with the Charlotte, Charleston and Greenville Symphony Orchestras as a substitute musician. Petrea holds a Master's degree from the University of South Carolina and a Bachelor's degree from the Ithaca College School of Music. She has a private studio in Columbia and is oboe instructor at Furman University and the SC Governor's School for the Arts in Greenville, SC. Petrea is also an Alexander Technique Teacher Trainee at the three-year training course directed by Robin Gilmore: Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies.

Teacher-Trainee Contribution:

Head Balance: Understanding the Alexander Technique in Terms of Tensegrity

-or-

"So – just how does that big, heavy head balance on those little, tiny neck bones?"

By Joseph Arnold

One view of the way our bodies work is that our big, heavy skulls with our brains, fluids, muscles, eyes, ears, and jaws must all sit on our neck, which in turn sits on our chest, which sits on our low back, which sits on our pelvis, which either sits on our legs or our chairs – all of it like one big column. Another view is that our bones float in a massively integrated, highly organized, self-supporting, moveable complex of fascia, muscle, skin, fluids, and cavities, capable of incredible grace and ease of movement. Which view could most help us in our understanding of the Alexander Technique?

The Soft Machine

Many textbooks on anatomy in medical schools, chiropractic schools, and massage schools, among others, present one particular view of how our soft tissues (i.e. muscles and related fascia) interact with our hard tissues (bones, etc.). Culturally, a prevailing view is that bones act as rods and muscles act as pistons, like Renee Descartes' idea of the "soft machine." In many text books, muscles and bones are presented out of context, one at a time, with one end of a muscle on a less moveable bone, the origin, acting on a more movable bone, the insertion [For a clear example of this, refer to Trail Guide to the Body, by Andrew Biel]. The biggest thing that happens in a muscle is its contraction. It contracts when it receives a nerve impulse from its particular motor neurons connected to the brain, and its lengthening is given little notice in text books, mainly because there are no voluntarily-controlled anatomical features for lengthening. But as we shall see later in this paper, a muscle's ability to lengthen is just as important as its ability to contract.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

Continued . . .

On a larger scale, the idea is that a body is structured much the way a house is – one thing stacked on top of another. All the weight of the head is transferred to the top cervical vertebrae, which is then transferred to the second, and so on down the spine to the pelvis, which holds it all up. All the muscles hang from their respective insertions and origins, and then it's all wrapped up in a tube of skin. All of the movements we do, from walking, to breathing, to playing a musical instrument, are a result of muscles acting on bones.

There is much truth to this, and it is a powerful and important way of thinking about our bodies because it allows us to see how we make gross movements, such as lifting one's arm, and can give us a diagnostic tool for muscle injuries. However, there are several drawbacks to this way of thinking. After all, houses are built by stacking one thing on another, but certainly aren't meant to be moveable or weight efficient – two very important characteristics of all animals. From an architectural point of view, the only way such a relatively tall structure as a person could balance on such small supports as our feet is if it's anchored to the ground and has reinforcements stiffly bracing every joint. We clearly know that we are not anchored like trees or houses, and that we are indeed moveable in all our joints. Indeed, such bracing at every joint would, in the long run, be detrimental to one's health.

Furthermore, from a biological point of view, the theory of evolution tells us that the spine evolved horizontally, not vertically as in humans, which certainly puts into question the whole idea of a vertebral "column." From an anatomical point of view, this doesn't hold up either, because our nervous system is organized so that no one muscle ever acts on its own. From a simply mechanical point of view, any action on a joint must necessarily involve movements or change in tone in the many muscles crossing it.

As we can see in the illustration on the next page, there are numerous muscles directly and indirectly acting on the knee. Every time the knee is flexed or extended, all these muscles change in length and tone. In addition to that, any muscle that acts on any bone connected by way of ligament or muscle to the femur, tibia, or fibula will *also* affect the knee. These include anything in the feet, pelvis, spine, arms, head, and neck – basically our whole body.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

Continued . . .

This is all due to the simple fact that we always move in relation to gravity and the ground and not in some gravity-free void (with the exception of astronauts who end up in a very poor state even after a short duration in space). All these relationships take form via millions of constant, highly organized micro-movements, the contractions and lengthenings involved in breathing and balancing, going on from the moment we're conceived to the moment we die.

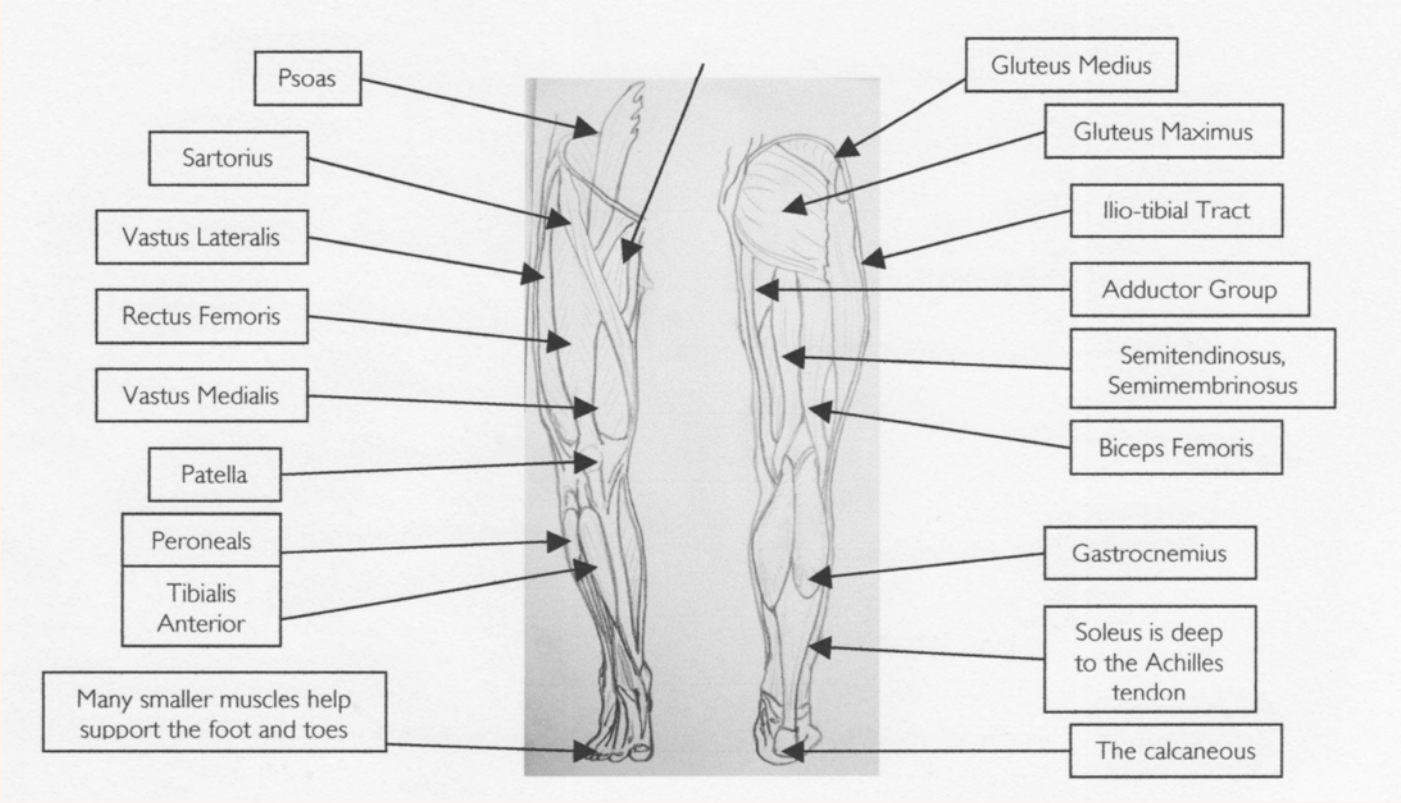

Figure 1 Any action at the knee joint affects the whole leg, and thus the whole body.

Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

Continued . . .

Other questions come to mind. If the bones are holding up all the soft tissue, what's holding up the bones? Who has ever seen a skeleton stand on its own? And if the vertebrae are all stacked, one on top another, how on earth does that big, heavy head balance on those little, tiny neck bones? It would be like those circus performers who spin plates on poles, only the pole is made of 24 individually articulating pieces, and the plate is replaced by a ten-pound sphere. As you can see, there are clearly limitations to the conventional viewpoint of the structure and movements of the body.

Tensegrity and Dynamic Movement

If, then, we are not structured like a house, what are we structured like? What other kinds of structures are there? One important kind of structure that might provide an excellent model for vertebrates, such as ourselves, is that of tensegrity. "Tensegrity" is a term coined by Buckminster Fuller for a structure that includes both compression members and tension members. Tension members are those that can pull, and not push; like a rubber band, a rope, or even the latex of a balloon. Compression members are those that can resist inward pressure; such as a brick in a brick wall, a tent pole, or the air inside a balloon. The integrity of a tensegral structure relies on these compression and tension members existing in a dynamic balance, so that changes in even one compression or tension member will register throughout the whole, and that the removal of one will likely so drastically change the overall shape as to render it unrecognizable.

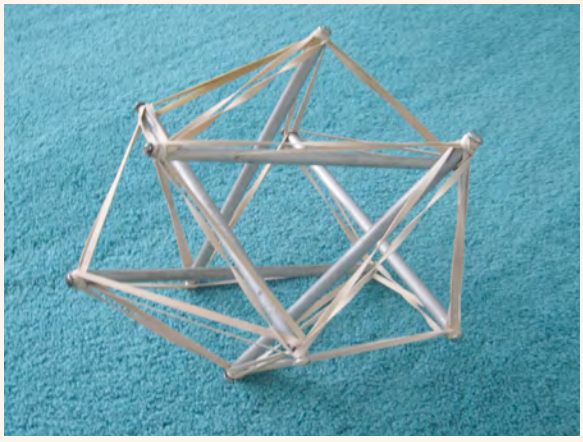

Figure 2 A simple tensegrity structure made of aluminum rods and rubber bands.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

Continued . . .

Another characteristic of tensegral structures is that they are maximally efficient in relation to weight. In other words, a tensegral structure could be as large as a house, and as strong as a house, while weighing only a fraction of what a house would weigh. This is important in terms of living things because animals need to be movable, strong, and light relative to their size. Perhaps the most important characteristic of tensegral structures, in terms of our discussion, is that the interrelations of all the parts of a tensegrity contribute to its ability to suspend itself effortlessly. In contrast to a brick wall, where the top brick bears no weight and the bottom brick bears the weight of all the ones stacked on top of it, all the parts of a tensegrity share some of the load of its overall weight. In other words, the tension members do just as much lifting work as the compression members. If vertebrates were tensegral structures, this would mean that our compression members, bones, are not the sole bearers of weight, as is the conventional view. But rather, our weight is also suspended by our tension members – muscles and related fascia. This is important because it would drastically change the way we think about our bodies – how we move, change, heal, balance, and breathe.

An understanding of tensegrity helps those of us in the Alexander community understand our work a little better. An experience common to us who study the Alexander Technique is one of easy, self-supporting, free movement. This would seem to jive better with the characteristics of tensegral structures than with compressive ones. I hope that this paper will help make clear in what ways this is so.

Movement at the knee not only affects the muscles, which move the tibia and fibula in relation to the femur, but also affects every muscle, and therefore every joint, of the body. In the following section, let's explore this interrelatedness in order to make clear just how it is that soft tissue suspends hard tissue – a view very much at odds with conventional wisdom – in the contexts of arthritis and low back pain.

Arthritis, Low Back Pain, and Tensegrity

Arthritis is a painful condition in which the lining of the bones at a joint becomes worn, making movement and bearing weight difficult. The condition can develop as the muscles acting on a joint become chronically tight, squeezing the cartilage at the end of each bone together.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

Continued . . .

Over time the cartilage wears down, sometimes to the bone, creating conditions for lack of movement and much pain. Traditional treatments include pain-pills, which are simply palliative; physical therapy, which helps in some cases but doesn't get to the root cause; and surgery, such as joint replacement, which is an invasive and dangerous procedure. Some find that manual therapies, such as massage and trigger point, can help relax the muscles and thus relieve pressure on the joint. Mindfulness and body/mind integration training, such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong, and the Alexander Technique, can also prove effective.

As described previously, each tension and compression member of a tensegrity structure shares in weight-bearing. This, coupled with a tensegrity structure's characteristic spaciousness, leads to a situation in which no one joint carries the weight of the whole. Some say that the knee bears the weight of the whole upper body and that this is why so many people have knee pain. This is a misconception, because if humans were tensegral, this would mean that all the muscles and fascia surrounding the knee, and thus the legs, feet, hips, and torso would all be sharing the weight of the whole body. Because of this, a joint such as the knee, designed for tensegrity, would not necessarily be able to take the full weight of a body on its own for the lifetime of an individual. Perhaps what is happening is that improper tension in a human being, from whatever cause, leads to a condition in which the way the weight of the body is normally distributed becomes distorted, causing a joint to gradually transform from a tensegral, spacious one, to a compressive one.

Low back pain can also give us an interesting point from which to understand tensegrity and weight bearing. More people than I could count have some sort of back pain, one of the most commonly affected areas being the lumbar, or low back, region. Why is this? What makes the low back so susceptible to pain? Perhaps it is because of the idea of a "waist" and the ability to "bend at the waist." There is no such thing as "waist" other than the point to which you might pull up your trousers or skirt. Or perhaps it is that our culture has a taboo against "sticking your butt out" when we pick something up off the ground.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

Continued . . .

Inhibition and Non-Doing

Before we explore the movements of this continuum any further, an important point has to be made. The movements I am talking about here are not movements that we can "do" or make happen in the usual, overt use of skeletal muscle. One of the key discoveries F.M. Alexander made is that all our movements take place within the overall pattern of the primary control. Only when we interfere with our primary control with excessive effort, ingrained fear responses, mindless habits, and a lack of self-awareness do we find that the functioning of our body and mind becomes compromised. In other words, our whole self is organized in such a way that it will function perfectly well if we don't get in the way of it.

So how do we keep from interfering with our primary control? This is the role of "inhibition." In Alexander Technique, we do not use this term as Freud used it – to denote a repressed memory or emotion – rather; inhibition refers to non-doing, getting-out-of-the-way-of, allowing, and freeing. What you *don't do* is just as important as what you *do*. This does not imply a kind of laziness, apathy, lethargy, or the collapse of most people's idea of "relaxation." From a certain perspective, to inhibit is to increase awareness of movement and thought, to take a step back and watch one's reactions, and to keep from immediately engaging one's habitual response, which usually involves our "fight or flight" or "startle" response. When we step back from our habitual response, we become aware of what we are doing to ourselves, and so can *actively release our patterns of tension*. When we inhibit our habitual reactions, we can allow our primary control to be the means by which we accomplish whatever our intention is at the moment.

F.M. Alexander's discovery of the role of inhibition is what makes the Alexander Technique so unique in relation to all other studies, and what separates it from manual therapies, such as massage, rolfing, chiropractic, and shiatsu. In these therapies, the therapist manipulates the client's body in various ways, which produces various effects throughout the client's whole self. Though these might bring temporary relief, these therapies do not address the underlying cause of the client's problems, which is that the client is getting in the way of him or herself. An Alexander Technique teacher helps the student become aware of how the student is interfering with his or her own primary control, and so gives the student a means to change from within. A useful analogy might be the adage, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day…" i.e. manual therapies, "…teach a man to fish and he eats for life," i.e. the Alexander Technique.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

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For an interesting example concerning inhibition, we can take a look at a sport called "cattle throwing." In this sport, the main objective is to throw a bull down to the ground by grabbing his horns and pushing just so. Successful cattle throwers can bypass the bull's primary control by pushing the bull's head back and down in a quick, strong movement. This movement engages the bull's startle pattern, which compromises the bull as a whole, and so the bull is thrown to the ground. Unsuccessful cattle throwers usually do the movement too slowly or too late, thus allowing the bull to change his response from one of startle to one of lengthening. If that happens, there is no way the cattle thrower can throw the bull down. This shows us just how powerful the primary control is: if we get out of the way of our primary control, we will be upright, easy, and strong. If it is compromised or interfered with, we will be weakened and tend to collapse – how else could a single person throw down such a strong animal as a grown bull?

When an Alexander Technique teacher says, "the movement of the head is forward and up," they are not referring to something that the student should "do." Rather, the teacher is referring to what the student might allow to happen, which comes from giving oneself space, time, and a foundation of gentle self-awareness, out of which this movement can happen spontaneously.

The Seamless Continuum

If you take a skull in your hands and place one hand on the forehead, and two fingers of the other hand on the exact spots where the top vertebra, the atlas, touches deep inside the bottom of the skull – the occiput, you will notice that when you take the hand on the forehead off the skull, it will tip forward and you will have to catch it with your free hand. This means that, in relation to the atlanto-occipital joint (A/O joint), the head is heavier in the front than in the back.

Please see Figure 3 on next page

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

Continued . . .

Figure 3 A skull is slightly heavier in the front than in the back.

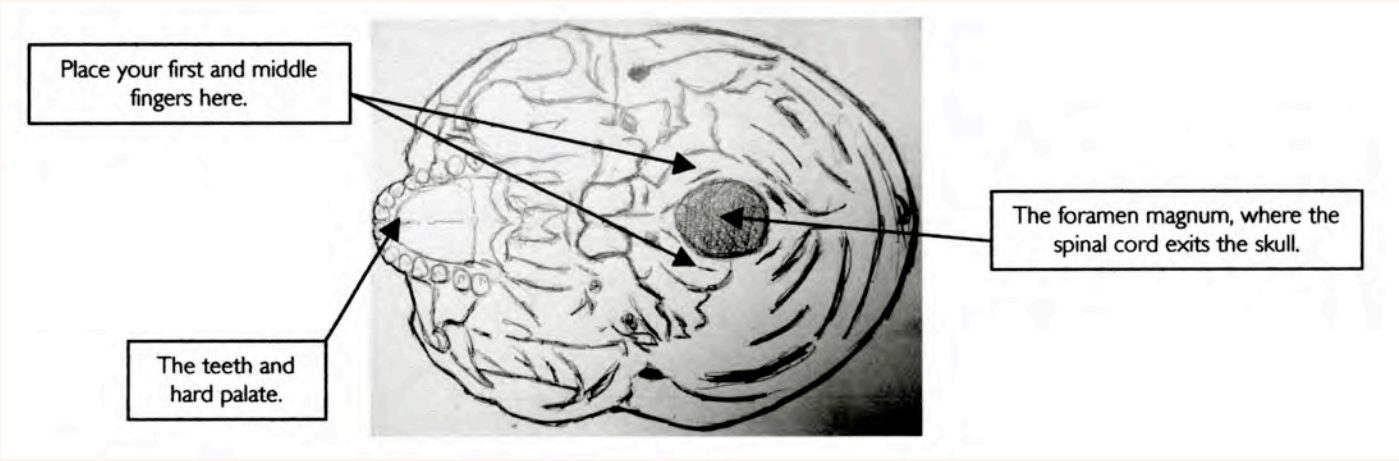

Figure 4 The inferior aspect of the skull

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

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When we allow this slight movement to happen in ourselves, the front of the head moves down and the back of the head moves up in relation to this joint. This movement involves the lengthening and stretching of the muscles in the back and sides of the neck, and allows the cartilage between the vertebrae of the neck to become ever so slightly more spacious in back. This results in the overall extending (straightening) the neck. Allowing this slight extension of the overall neck causes an overall lengthening of the neck in relation to the ground, providing support underneath the skull. When the head moves forward and up in relation to the A/O joint and the ground, it draws with it the vertebrae underneath. In other words, the structure and movements of the head and neck form a feedback loop in which *the very same gravitational pull that draws the head down is the one that lifts it up*. This is the "lengthening phase."

There are microscopic stretch receptors called "muscle spindles" that pervade every muscle, which sense when a muscle has stretched too far, then reflexively contract. These have their place when the lengthening phase begins to reach its peak, and the muscles of the back and sides of the neck sense the extent of the lengthening and respond with minute contractions. This causes the whole overall movement of the head and neck to shift in the opposite direction, thus initiating the "contracting phase." The contracting phase consists of the head moving back and down in relation to the top joint, shortening the back of the neck and lengthening the front, which includes the face, jaw, tongue, and throat. The vertebrae, no longer having the lengthening support of the muscles and related fascia of the back of the neck, compress together in the back, and so the neck flexes slightly. This action causes the muscle spindles in the muscles of the front and sides of the neck and torso to kick in and cause miniscule contractions pulling the head forward in space and allowing it to rotate forward slightly, thus initiating the lengthening phase. The lengthening and contracting phases form the conditions under which each one is both the cause and limit of the other. This movement is not only back-to-front, but also takes place side-to-side, in spirals, and is organized so that one phase melds into another, much like the movements of waves on the shore. See Figure 5 on next page.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

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Figure 5
The motion of the water moving back from the shore, supported both by the ground and mass of water offshore, is the means by which water can be moved upwards – thus forming a wave.

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Teacher Trainee Contribution: Head Balance . . .

By Joseph Arnold

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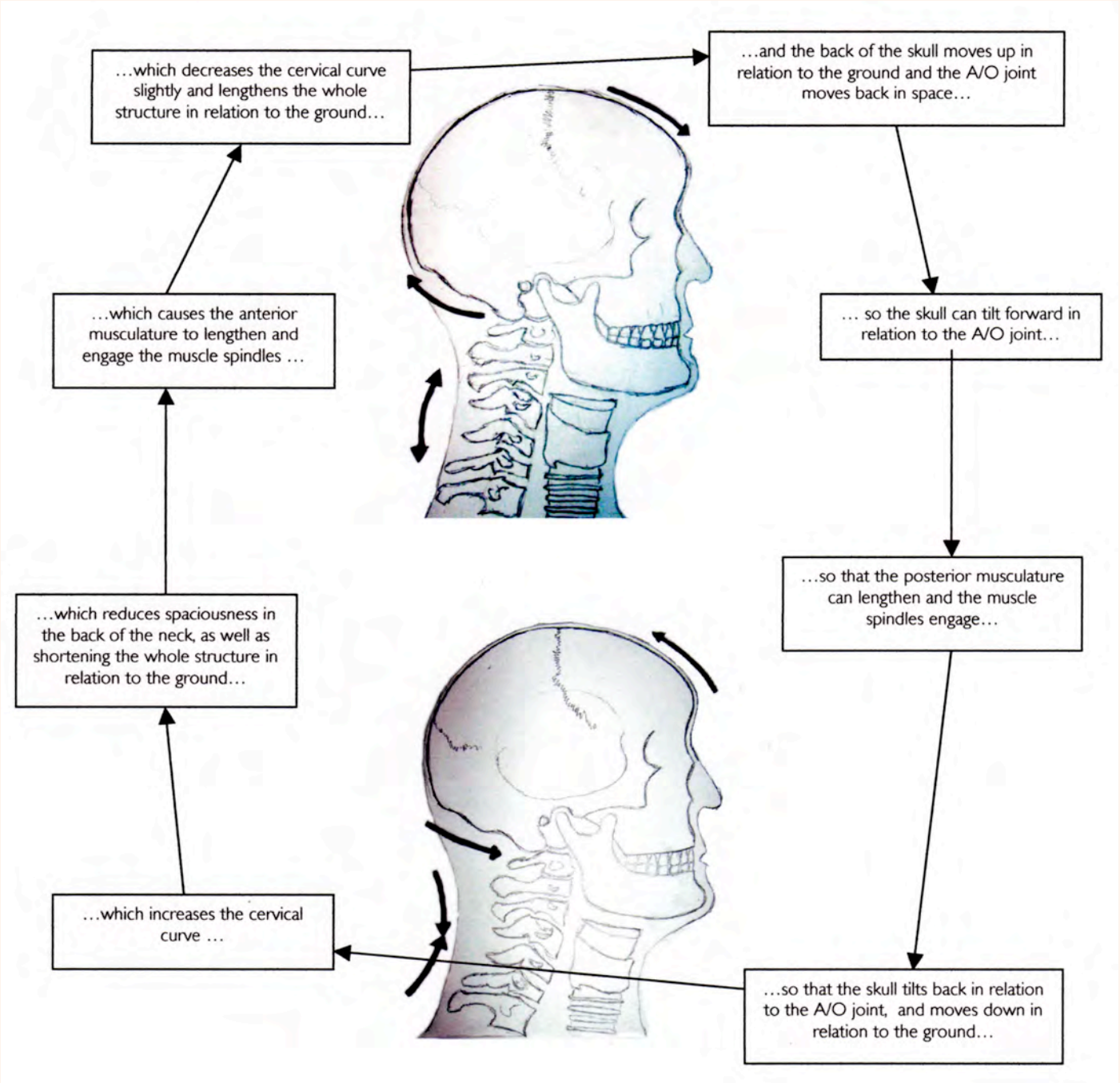

Figure 6 (top skull) The lengthening phase Figure 7 (lower skull) the contracting phase

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Balance is essential to this process. If the lengthening phase goes too far and becomes habituated, it becomes the over-extension of the head and neck that might be seen in some dancers, among others. If the contracting phase goes too far and becomes habituated, it becomes the slump of "bad posture" that is so commonly seen in people in all walks of life. Either of these extremes causes the tensegrity of the whole to collapse in certain ways, creating the conditions for discomfort and injury.

Figure 8 Joseph Arnold demonstrating over-extension (left photo) and over-flexion (right photo) of his head and neck

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When the feedback loop of the contracting phase is not checked by the opposing feedback loop of the lengthening phase, the back-and-down movement becomes extreme and can lead to a total collapse of one's body. It is usually not so extreme for most of the people in whom this type of movement is habituated, but in many people the contracting phase is chronically locked in place. This prevents the initiation of the lengthening phase and means that secondary structures must do the work of balancing. These secondary structures are usually the more superficial, action-oriented muscles, and can't provide the same support, grace, and ease of movement of the deeper balancing muscles.

Conclusion

As we know from the example of the multi-faceted array musculature, fascia, and bones related to the movement of the knee illustrated above, we can easily see that whatever happens in the neck is also what happens in the whole spine and torso. The head does not simply teeter on top of a wobbly column of bones. It is not that the neck has to hold up all of the weight of the head. *Rather, the weight of the head plays a key role in recruiting and inducing the simultaneous, patterned support of the whole body.* This means that when the lengthening and contracting phases of the head and neck are allowed to happen to their fullest, unimpeded expression of balance, they lengthen and shorten the musculature and fascia of the whole spine, arm structures, hips, and legs. When our habit is to impede our inborn coordination by tightening our neck, and most of us do this, allowing the head to go forward and up can coordinate the whole body. This is an integral part of the concept of primary control. When the primary control is allowed to happen, one's experience of movement is changed markedly: the whole body and mind act as one to create the conditions for the easeful, supported means whereby any intention may be carried out accurately and without inappropriate effort.

In contrast to a brick wall, where the bottom brick supports everything above it, our heads form the keystone of support for the rest of our body below it. For all vertebrates, the head moves first and the body follows. For example, if you watch a cat get up from lying down, you will see that it first looks up with its eyes. Then the head follows, and when the cat decides to get up, the head moves forward in the intended direction, with each vertebrae coming off the ground one at a time, like a string of pearls. This can sometimes be difficult to understand in the context of humans, perhaps because this movement is very subtle and can only be seen by a trained eye. This might also be the case because our usual point of reference is humans, and humans are among the few animals whose heads and spines don't directly point in the direction of movement.

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A structure that might lend us more understanding to this counter-intuitive idea is a tent. If we set up an old-fashioned tent, we would have two poles, a canvas sheet, and guy lines anchoring it all to the ground. The whole structure of the sheet and the guy lines work together to keep the tent poles upright, so that the tent poles can keep the whole structure of the sheet and guy lines up, so that they can work together to keep the tent poles up… ad infinitum. However, if you wanted to see how you could move the tent around most easily without destroying its integrity, you would find that trying to move the base of the tent or guy lines would be less efficient, and moving the tops of the tent poles would be most efficient. A Chinese proverb asks, "how do you move a 1,000-pound ox with two pounds of pressure?" Certainly, pushing on its rear end will not help. All you need do is put a ring in its nose and a string leading from it to your hand. The ox's nose is a very sensitive piece of flesh on the most sensitive part of its torso. It can easily ignore two pounds of pressure on its rump, but certainly will not ignore its nose being pulled on. The same thing happens in us: we can sense and respond to pressure and movement in the bottom of the torso, the hips, but will much more easily do so at the head and neck.

Figure 9 A bull with a ring in its nose will follow wherever you lead.

Figure 10 A tent is a type of tensegrity structure.

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With all this in mind, the next question is this: in what way does this help us understand the Alexander Technique better? In accordance with the conventional, compressive view, the head does indeed rest on and send weight down into those little tiny neck bones – but that's not the only thing that is happening. It is the particular and unimpeded *pattern of movement* of these structures in relation to gravity and the ground that forms the mechanism by which the head, neck, and torso can be supported and balanced. *In other words, the weight and structures of the whole body move down in relation to gravity while simultaneously moving up in relation to the ground*. Unlike our brick wall, it is not the simple fact of our structure that holds us up. Rather, it is the dynamic, interrelated balance among all the parts in their environment that creates a whole, moving, living, breathing, upright, and energized human being.

As you can now see, tensegrity structures can help us understand the experience of our bodies we have as Alexander Technique students and teachers that are so different than those commonly found by those holding the conventional viewpoint. Those of us who study the Alexander Technique often experience lightness, support, and a sense of connectedness in our whole body. These same characteristics can be found more easily in tensegrity structures than compressive ones.

Figure 11

A tensegrity model based on the human built by Joseph Joseph Arnold. The design is adapted from a model by by Intension Designs.

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Notes:

Figures 1,3,4,6, and 7 are adapted from "Trail Guide to the Body". Biel, Andrew. 2005

Joseph Arnold is a violinist, music teacher, massage therapist, and an Alexander Technique teacher trainee. He came to the work because of repetitive strain injuries sustained while studying music at Carnegie Mellon University, University, and is now currently enrolled in Martha Hansen Fertman's Philadelphia School for the Alexander Technique in in Philadelphia, PA.

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