

Mind Body 40 Days takes us on a forty-day venture into mind-body practice, into the wonder of the situation and the terror of the situation. The other aim is strictly professional: to put the Alexander Technique out there in its rightful place in this now-mainstream mind-body and mindfulness enterprise.

I had the opportunity last fall to take a four-month writing sabbatical with Semester at Sea, so this book was written while circumnavigating the globe, while walking through the souks in Morocco, the mud tracks and slave castles on the coast of Ghana, , hiking the spectacular capes and witnessing the mind-boggling inequities in South Africa --not that we don't have our own right here!--while traveling to Mauritius, India, Singapore, Viet Nam, China, Japan, back to Hawai'i, and then to San Diego. Here we go:

Day 1 Life Within the Body

...We begin our practices--Mindfulness meditation, Alexander Technique, Centering--most of us, looking for change. And as we come, with open hearts and searching minds and (if we remember to invite that troublesome other bit of ourselves) with bodies ready to undo and reorganize, we look forward with Hope. "I *wish* to change!" is what brings us to the cushion or the chair, the class or the teacher, in the first place.

Yet there is a pull backwards through a kind of reverse foreboding: "I've always been this way. *Can* I change?" We stand like Janus on our first day, on Day 1, looking ahead as the future pulls us forward--mindful that we are, and will be many times as we evolve into our practices--at the same time pulled back, not always, but

sometimes, by equal force, by doubt and habit and that grumbling voice, that inner heckler, that announces to us in no uncertain terms that "*We cannot do this.*" We cannot really move beyond what has always been.

...In Jeanne de Salzmans's *Being and Reality* she refers to "a certain struggle that was not directed *against* automatic functioning as much as it was *for* the positive aim of remaining present."¹

Remaining present has everything to do with being in contact with life within the body. What does this mean: "*contact with life within the body?*" Could it be that in spite of outside experiences, in spite of the wanderings of our attention, in spite of how we may be feeling or thinking at any given moment, we can strive to maintain a neutral contact with our selves? Many practices help us develop the capacity to do this. The Alexander Technique offers us a way simple and at the same time complete.

A student of this Technique is asked to stop reinforcing the thoughts-going- astray, as often and as much as possible, and to begin redirecting available attention to the functioning design of the body: into how the head balances freely upon the spine, how the spine releases into length, responsive and springy as a result of the head-neck freedom, into the whole coordination of the whole body as it moves us around in the world.

Personal practice of the Alexander Technique and other mind-body disciplines can take us a long way toward a wished-for stable presence while gently

¹ Jeanne de Salzmans, *The Reality of Being: The Fourth Way of Gurdjieff* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2010), p. xvii.

leading us away from automatic functioning--that habitual approach to our lives which amounts to running around on auto pilot, plagued by our thoughts, stirred by our anxieties and our fears, and dragging our bodies along on a very bumpy ride, indeed.

Day 20 The Five Relations -

This is an excerpt from the eight entries that comprise the heart of the *MB40D*.

Let's begin to explore five key relationships in the body. The relationship of the head to the spine is both the prequel to our series of five relations, and it is the Fifth Relation itself, the one that integrates and animates all of the others. A simple way to describe this relationship is that when we move, the head leads and the body follows.

The way head-leading-body-following works is more sophisticated than we might think. The head does not pull the body along like a train engine pulling the cars. What the head does do is balance in a lovely, precarious, delicate way, way up high at the very top of the spine, behind the eyes, between the ears, even up above the tongue.

Think of the ongoing small spontaneous articulate nods of the free head-neck relationship releasing the spine like a spring. As the spine releases it organizes the

whole torso, and the eyes--the navigation system of our bodies--lead our whole coordination about.

...We have just spent a week in Ghana, where women bear huge loads upon their heads with their bodies swinging freely underneath. Very large aluminum dishes are set upon the head upon a coil of cloth; the dishes are filled with fruit, vegetables, plantain leaves, water sachets, once perhaps thirty large cans of tomatoes--this a load that must have weighed 30 pounds or more--piles of kente cloth, of eggs carefully, geometrically stacked, and (we are told by an English couple we meet who are building a school in Kumasi; we ourselves did not see this one) even a live goat, curled up in the dish, along for the ride.

This is less a matter of strength in the neck and back than a demonstration of optimal coordination: the head is perched--gently mobile--on the top two vertebrae of the spine. The center of gravity of the head is in play forward of this, the perch becomes the fulcrum for a constantly renewing, very tiny, nod of the head forward of the spine. The nod guides the whole apparatus into free coordination. This is Alexander's great discovery.

In the case of the women freely bearing their loads, the spine is sprung free into length by the tiny movement of the head, of the load, into what Alexander Technique people call the *Up*. *Up* is natural to us, it is built in, and the women of Ghana employ *Up* to its full advantage.

Day 26 Why Don't We Know This?

...In order to inhabit ourselves in an intelligent and articulate way (I'm redefining "intelligence" in this case to include body intelligence, a notion that is still pretty foreign to many of us, even as we enter this age of mind-body fitness and Mindfulness meditation), we have to have some basic knowledge of our own structures.

This week's stop on our odyssey is Mauritius, an African island off the east coast of Madagascar. Mauritius is ringed by a coral reef and we are out with a host of college students and a few faculty exploring this little corner of Indian Ocean paradise with snorkels and masks, seeing fishes of all colors and shapes and designs, all foreign to us, Americans in Afro-Asian waters.

We're on the deck of the reef-bound catamaran when we overhear a student--a lovely, fit young woman in her bathing suit tanning with her friends--complaining (as she indicates the bony flare of her pelvis, that wide shelf of bone where we hang our trousers, but not the place our legs attach to the torso, which is the true hip, found much lower down):

"I thought this was my hip bone, but it turns out this (she gestures vaguely somewhat lower than the previously-acknowledged hip bone) is my hip bone. I don't have any idea what this is!" (She gestures peevishly back to the flare of the hip.)

Recently I was working on board with a charming South African woman in her seventies who asked me during her first lesson (we were defining together her sit bones, lower back curve, shoulder joints, getting all three freed up in relation to each other and to her spine): "Why don't we know where these are?"

It is so simple to use ourselves intelligently once we know. The answer to "Why don't we know?" is simple, but difficult to remedy on a wide scale. We don't know because we haven't been taught. Our education nourishes our brains with facts and ideas and concepts, but fails to address the immediate subject of our selves, how we live and move. Then, as adults, we have a sense that this knowledge is so immediate, so close to ourselves, so intimate, that we can't *believe* we don't know, we can't believe that we have these simple things to learn. Even when it is made available to us--this knowledge of the organization of sensation and structure in the body--we may doubt the power that it has to transform.

Day 34 Nature is Full of Miracles

What elaborate experiment might measure the integration present in young children in relation to the more brittle and strained functioning of adults? Can we quantify the aspects of a child's wholeness: balance, attentiveness, quickness, agility, springiness, ease? What we find in the child in the adult gets lost to time. Yet the words themselves--ease, spring, quickness, lightness--are qualitative terms and will fall only so far under the umbrella of science in order to be understood.

That which is quantitative--measurable, attainable--defines our contemporary culture. Jacob Needleman, in his latest book *Time and the Soul*, describes the desperation of a culture driven by quantity:

Almost all of us are gasping for more time. We are starving. And all the devices and techniques that our inventive culture offers only increase the yearning for time--like the food of hell that makes the eater hungrier. Our cell phones, computers and fax machines and the countless other inventions that 'save time' only starve us more and more, exactly like the food of hell. We are paying for these things with our time, with our lives, which is our time.²

When we slow down, when we stop, we begin to break this hold that time has over us. Presence has a timeless quality; when we get out of the way, according to F. M. Alexander, "the right thing does itself."³

There is a monograph written by Louise Morgan with a forward by Aldous Huxley, within which lies a ten-page diary by Mrs. G. R., of New York, who had upwards of thirty lessons with F. M. Alexander in the 1950's. Mrs. G.R. had had a long illness and was bedridden. The illness was now "cured," and yet she continued to weaken. She subjected herself to all kinds of painful treatments and therapies, but to no avail. Mrs. G.R. heard one of her doctors whispering to another one bleak day, "Poor soul! You agree with me, there isn't a hope."⁴

Unable to walk or to stand, she found her way, with the help of Louise Morgan, to Mr. Alexander's door. Louise writes of Mrs. G.R.'s first lesson:

² Jacob Needleman, *Time and the Soul: Where Has All The Meaningful Time Gone--And Can We Get It Back?* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003), pp. 76-77.

³ Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud* (Berkeley, CA: Mornum Time Press, 1994), p. 75.

⁴ Louise Morgan, *Inside Yourself: A New Way to Health Based on the Alexander Technique* (Stratford Place, London: Hutchinson and Company, LTD., 1954) pp. 17-19.

With deft and expert touches of hand and fingers he [Mr. Alexander] explored her head and neck muscles, turning the head slightly from side to side, feeling the various parts of the head and neck as if he were so to speak dissecting the living muscles and fibres.

After working in this way for nearly half an hour, he asked her, "Are you tired?"

"Too interested to be tired," she replied.

A minute later he said quietly, with his hands at the base of her head, "I want you to stand up."

"Stand up?" she echoed in a stupefied voice. "I haven't stood up for years."

"Never mind. It will be quite all right. When I say stand up, just stand up. That's all."

Almost immediately he repeated "Stand up!" And she rose easily, and there she stood on her two feet, beaming with delight and nearly in tears with the shock of happy surprise.

When she got her breath, she gasped, "It's a miracle!"

"Nature is full of miracles," he commented drily.

To her, a miracle. To Mr. Alexander, a matter of course, a reliable and repeatable affair.

Day 38 The Terror of the Situation

...every thought, every feeling, every movement of the body is the manifestation of a specific energy, and in the lopsided human being one energy is constantly swelling up to swamp the other. This endless pitching and tossing [among] mind, feeling, and body produces a fluctuating series of impulses, each of which deceptively asserts itself as 'me': as one desire replaces another, there can be no continuity of intention, no true wish, only the chaotic pattern of contradiction in which we all live, in which the ego has the illusion of will power and independence. Gurdjieff calls this 'the terror of the situation.'⁵

This morning as we near the end of our voyage we are tossing in the South China Sea. Last evening the library books were roped into their shelves and in the hallways anything that could tip over in high seas was discreetly removed and stored away. Fair warning for rough weather. Sure enough, by the middle of the night we are in a proper gale: wind whipping, rain lashing, waves lifting and dropping the ship from trough to crest, from crest to trough.

How, then, to approach "the terror of the situation?" In the tempest of our daily lives we tend to follow every lead, to give our attention to the whipping and the lashing and the lifting, perhaps in order to give ourselves a sense of controlling the events which toss us about, perhaps simply because our attention is unschooled, keen to run rogue, to go wherever it wants to go.

⁵ Peter Brook, "The Secret Dimension." (excerpt from "Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching") (Soul issue), Parabola, 1 June, 1996.

...Think of hurrying across an icy sidewalk and *wham*, your attention and focus return to yourself, to the urgency of your physical balance, the moment your feet begin to skid away from underneath you.

Many years ago a group of Alexander teacher-trainees were in the kitchen baking loaves of banana bread for holiday giving. There were perhaps five cooks in the kitchen and two trainers directing us through the activity. The kind of hustle and bustle that arises in a busy kitchen--particularly when five cooks are present-- never had a chance. Every action--from reading the recipe to mashing the bananas, from setting the oven temperature to measuring the ingredients to stirring the batter-- was done with quiet intention, and the intention centered on staying in direct contact with the physical body, with the Primary Control, throughout the activity.

The kitchen remained a quiet, not a stormy, place and at the end of the morning, after the buzzer had signaled the completion of the baking, five of us opened the oven and beheld three perfect loaves--crested, golden, sweet-smelling-- in hushed silence. We hadn't *done* anything to produce them, that was our sense of it. The requisite kitchen commotion, the doing or over-doing to which we were accustomed, had been quelled by our continuity of attention, by what Peter Brook calls our "true wish."

In our desire to perform well in our lives, our one true wish can be for greater awareness. Nature is indeed full of miracles, we need only learn to be present to them as they unfold.