

Flying the Kite  
By Varda Shepherd  
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Chronic tendonitis (of the wrists and arms) brought me to the Alexander Technique. The orthopaedic surgeon I first saw happily injected cortisone into my tendons whenever preparation before a concert or competition and the resultant injury from practice brought me to him. He never asked about what I was doing in playing the piano, which caused the tendonitis. I remember my heart sinking as he would reach for the syringe, and the looming performance would have me grit my teeth as the needle punctured the skin.

After about six sets of cortisone shots over a period of two years, I was talking to a friend who suggested that I try the Alexander Technique. I felt my body could not go on this way; I was no longer able to carry a bucket containing two inches of water. Plans to study piano at university that autumn were in doubt. My state of quiet desperation was such that I did not question but arranged to meet a teacher called M.

After some time spent lying on the table, conversation ranging across many topics, M's hands gently bringing me to an awareness of my body in different areas, I arose to walk with lightness never experienced previously. Memories still surface of feeling clumsy as a child, an inner awkwardness expressing in a heavy and ungainly sense of movement.

That was the first of many sessions spanning an initial four-year period of my encounter with the technique. The lightness was an elusive but beckoning force in my fascination with application of the principles I was meeting. I would usually seek out lessons three or four times a week.

I began to understand the force of the habitual overdoing which was the product of my conditioning. Anxiety and stress had been constants in my home of origin, my migrant parents struggling in contending with many unknowns. I now know that they were traumatized and in stress mainly because of the Holocaust in which loss of many families as well as the threat to their own right to exist was a constant reality. I now understand that I took on their stress, osmotically, inevitably. Discomfort with self was as familiar to me as sky might be to the sun.

Very gradually I began to learn about the habitual tensing of my neck and jaws that accompanied every movement. I began to relate to the capacity of the body to think up, crown releasing to the ceiling, face and jaws softening forward. I began to allow the body to breathe in its fullness, to soften and release the screaming tensions of 26 years.

I regularly lay on my back during the day, resting between bouts of practice for I had started the piano performance degree at Tel Aviv University. In semi-supine, back to the carpeted floor, head resting on some books, knees breathing toward the ceiling, heels letting toes breathe, I began to meet myself in relative stillness. Rest was being introduced to my system. I began to enjoy staring up at the ceiling. Breath had always been hard to draw, tightness and shortness and a struggle. All direct efforts to change had brought me into greater tension. But now, whenever I could stop the habitual sufficiently to allow something else to express within the body, letting go led to the enjoyment of just being.

My identity had always depended on doing. From the age of 5 I began to execute pianistic feats that led to performance in front of many people weekly, monthly, in competition and concert. I felt exposed, and often violated by the energies running high around me. Eager parents promoting offspring, jealousy and criticism in the backstage corridors wilted my developing buds of artistry.

It was tough going to lessons every week with an embittered woman who was frustrated in her own performing career, herself developing a chronic complaint which ultimately had her sitting by my side, one arm bandaged, sipping afternoon tea and making caustic remarks about my playing. Through many seasons of study, with many unheard attempts on my part to tell my parents how unenjoyable it was for me, I continued. My love for music was on the verge of dying when at 15 I decided that enough was enough that I wanted to let my nails grow and to hell with achievements and trophies on the living room mantelpiece.

But I had imbibed bitter draughts and carried the memories in the cells of my body. When I returned to play again at 22, my muscles were habituated to tension and sourness of soul. It was the start of an odyssey to reclaim my love, my skill, to forge new understandings.

Doing and non-doing. Grappling with the piano, the jumping of extraneous muscle groups into action with every note, having to slow down when my habit was to speed, learning to listen to the music inside before letting it down to the white and black keys. How to think the back back and up whilst balancing the head forward and up whilst my hands released to the keys whilst my knees allowed thighs to lengthen. And always the reversion to the habitual straining. But moments of contentment began to filter through the effort, the confusion, the habit pummelling me back into servitude and my quest for freedom urging me ever onwards.

As time passed, the tendonitis abated but the difficult pieces I was learning were extremely strenuous, and my future as a pianist seemed tenuous at best. I improved during the four-year degree, won first prize in chamber music with a violist, and sat on stage in a prestigious auditorium to play the Brahms sonata and others.

Four years had passed, I had grown in many ways, but playing the Brahms I felt again the scream of my soul through tense fingers, never playing all the notes, never reaching richness of sound I knew was a possibility.

So I decided to enter a training programme as a teacher of the technique, solely as a financially more viable option – three private lessons a week were costing me as much as a teachers' course would. I knew I had to rehabilitate my use of my self from scratch if I was ever to sit on stage and enjoy the gifts I had been granted.

Three years followed in which I resolved never to play any written music. It was hard after a while, and when the call to play was overwhelming, I would let myself improvise instead, playing slowly enough to be able to direct the body into better alignments. I loved the training programme, was surprised that learning to lay hands on co-students was much easier for me than playing the piano.

I had not intended to teach the technique, but found in the third year of study that some students were arriving in this way. I had been teaching piano throughout the music degree, and now was incorporating my psychophysical understandings in students' piano lessons. Another subject really, because I knew through this teaching that my interest lay in the whole student, and not in the achievement of playing a piece of known music, something parents did not always understand or condone.

Musically new vistas were opening and I improvised in concerts for friends. In my last year of the training programme, I was invited to make a recording of my pieces in England, "Meditation for Peace" which was a wonderful experience. It was becoming increasingly apparent to me that the field of composition was much more suited to me than conventional classical performance. Allowing my own unique rhythm and musicality to express at the piano was leading me to a deeper and more powerful relationship with sound and its potentialities.

Completion of the training arrived very quickly, and gradually my clientele grew. Changes in my personal life led to relocation in a new town, where my practice again built up. Each encounter with a new pupil broadened my horizons, and I felt a need to expand the range of modalities offered to clients. I studied music and movement therapy for a year.

I also began to study composition with a gifted composer who received Alexander lessons in exchange. I was invited to join a theatre group preparing a show for a fringe festival. My task was to write music for the troupe, the director outlining styles and durations required. It was an intensive period in my life, travelling long distances to rehearse and develop the show whilst balancing complexities of new motherhood with my ordinary AT and piano teaching work.

Members of the troupe were creating their personal articulations of abuse experiences. It was a marvellous group of people and the production was original and varied, incorporating dance, song, spoken sections, skits. The pieces I wrote for the piano came relatively effortlessly. The show participated in another festival and ran for two years. Personally it represented the culmination of many years of study and effort. It was very special for me to sit playing my own pieces, applying the principles of Alexander in performance, working with a large number of people and communicating about vital issues to audiences of many persuasions.

Looking back it seems to me that my hands were telling me something about possibilities beyond the conceptualisations of my conditioned self, about flowing with life where a deeper intelligence organizes my evolution.

Alexander's work and the developments possible for people I have accompanied during 12 years of teaching connect me with the inspirational, vision skywards in balance with the surrounding ecosystem, the potential for softened and deepened human interaction.

I have since studied other therapies, especially exploring art therapy. My belief has grown in the experiential learning the Alexander technique offers. I have accompanied many people now in knowing something new within the body-self and sustaining a developing relationship with freedom.

Since first teaching AT in 1989 a broad range of people have come my way. When still living overseas, I received referrals from an orthopaedic surgeon who recognized the efficacy of AT. One memorable client was a farmer in excruciating pain from a slipped disc. I had the joy of accompanying him to complete recovery, which meant he could avoid surgery, and continue with plans for expansion in a large African project. I have worked with professionals for whom Alexander's principles are acutely relevant, particularly as their work involves stressful and repetitive activity – dancers, actors, horse riders, teachers, doctors, nurses, mental health professionals, computer whizzes. In my experience, any pupil interested in pursuing application of the work has benefited from improved well-being, reduction of pain and a deepened appreciation of the mechanics of true self-care.

I have taught children, teenagers and adults including senior citizens. Through working with a large number of women, I have gained understanding of the effects for them of violence and abuse, which unfortunately is very prevalent. It has been an enormous privilege to learn so many lessons of such import in these 20 years and I am excited by the knowledge that there is still so much more to discover.

To think I met with the Alexander Technique in Israel, whilst thousands of others have been helped by it around the world, yet it was all started by an Australian

actor over 100 years ago. My life journey has brought me to the very country where it began. What could have happened to me if I hadn't encountered the technique all those years ago? I feel deeply grateful to have side-stepped the perpetually anxious individual I would have become, able instead to enjoy life's roses and fly my kite.

Ends

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