

NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2002

YOUR RECOMMENDATION IS WHAT MAKES US GROW. IF YOU LIKE THE CONTENT OF THIS NEWSLETTER, PLEASE FORWARD IT TO YOUR FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES, ESPECIALLY PEOPLE WHO:

- WANT TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE
- ARE PUTTING UP WITH NAGGING PAIN PROBLEMS THEY CAN'T SEEM TO GET RID OF.

From Annie Kaszina and Madelene Webb

1. MALCOLM BALK'S ART OF RUNNING WORKSHOP

Malcolm's workshop provided rare inspiration for a crisp Sunday morning. Malcolm, who works with runners at all standards and is a Level 4 track coach in Montreal, Canada, undertook to transform the way we run in the space of just two hours.

All of us on the course were runners, albeit at different levels. As Malcolm shared his formidable expertise, we swiftly realised how much there is to know both about running and about our personal way of running: just doing it was not enough to give us any special grasp of *how* to do it. We quickly learned that there were various principles we would do well to take on board. After nearly 20 years experience teaching the AT, Malcolm condenses principles with consummate ease, into tiny, easily digested nuggets.

The first principle was to undo unnecessary tensions. The easiest way of starting to tackle these was by lying down in semi-supine for 5 or 10 minutes before starting to run. Then we started to look at what we were doing with our eyes, our head, our arms and our bodies as we ran. Awareness turned out to be the key. It enabled us to start to tackle our various quirks and replace them with an easier and lighter way of moving.

We took this awareness into one of Bloomsbury's tree-lined squares. After some further coaching, Malcolm told us we would be spending the next 40 minutes running and walking alternate laps of the square. It may not sound like the most exciting way of spending a chilly Sunday morning, but it proved to be inspirational. The time flew by. At the end of it, we felt energised and exhilarated. Best of all, we could hardly wait to get back out there and run some more.

2. FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

Dakota tribal wisdom says that when you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount. However, people have been known to try other strategies including:

- Buying a stronger whip
- Saying 'this is the way we have always ridden this horse'
- Appointing a committee to study the horse
- Arranging to visit other organisations to see how they ride dead horses
- Declaring that the horse is not dead, just resting
- Harnessing several dead horses together for increased speed
- Declaring that 'no horse is too dead to beat'

- Purchasing a product to make dead horses run faster
- Forming a quality circle to find uses for dead horses
- Promoting the dead horse to management

Alexander wisdom would say that you:

- bring the focus back from the horse to yourself
- look at your goal: ‘To what end was I riding that dead horse in the first place?’
- set about establishing the best means of achieving your goal
- decide on the appropriate course of action re: the dead horse
- establish how best to implement it

(Madelene and Annie would like to point out that any association to be made between jogging in a Bloomsbury square early on a Sunday morning and dead horses is purely accidental, and bears no resemblance to any person living or dead)

TRANSFORMATIONS

Many of our pupils start having lessons, because they are looking for change; generally of a quite specific nature. Often, they have already tried a number of therapies and the AT is a last resort. They may be frustrated by long-term pain, reduced freedom or range of movement, loss of balance, stress, ‘poor posture’ (their judgement, not ours), or any number of other problems. Some come having been told that they will ‘just have to learn to live with’ a problem that has had a huge negative impact on their life. They come because they *cannot* live with it, but they can’t rid themselves of it either.

On the whole they come with a clear idea of what they would like to be different, and how their lives will look once they have made that change. Life may go back to being the way it was before they had the problem; or it may remain the way it is now - but be better since the problem won’t impose its limitations on them any longer; or else X and Y will change, but Z won’t. Yes... and then no.

What is it about human beings, ourselves included, that leads us to underestimate change? If things change, they will be different: therefore they cannot remain the same.

Seemingly, we aren’t terribly clear about the nature of change. We tend to see change in terms of a (desired) end result. We are much less attuned to the notion of change as a process. Yet change is something that can be best identified with the overview of hindsight.

Being caught up in the process does strange things to us. In Alexander terms this means that as time goes by and we experience subtle movement, it can easily overlook it. Unless we take the time and trouble to look back carefully, we tend to miss subtle qualitative changes. Once past pain and physical limitations no longer hold us to ransom, it is amazing how quickly we forget.

Sometimes just looking at old photos is enough to remind us of the magnitude of the physical changes we have made. Only then do we realise that we look taller, straighter, happier, more present and comfortable in our body. Normally, we have our eyes fixed on our objective, somewhere in the middle distance, and so we don't notice how far we have travelled.

Then again, change presupposes that the road that we have travelled may not look quite the same as the road that we had in our mind's eye. The Technique works in a holistic way. As you make subtle shifts, not only do specific problems fade away, but, Heineken-like, the AT also seems to reach parts hitherto unreached; sometimes when you least expect it.

As you come out of your physical habits, it leaves the way open for you to come out of your mental responses to situations also, so that you can find yourself in one of those: 'Whoa, where did that come from?' moments. At times like that, that you register change... but you may not bother to trace the path that brought you to it.

On the physical level, we have had a number of pupils with whom we have worked on lengthening and widening the back. One day they will come and say: 'You know, my clothes hang on me better than they used to,' or: 'It's funny, I seem have gone up a size in jackets, yet I haven't put on any weight.' Often change is there for us to see, but we still look at things with the eye of habit.

Some changes that our pupils *have* recorded:

Freedom from long-term pain

Greater mobility

Better balance

Feeling more cheerful

Less effort going up and downstairs

Ability to stand/sit for much longer without discomfort

Ability to walk/run further

Less anxious

Ability to deal better with difficult situations at work

A new way of looking at things

Less stressed

More energy

Improved singing voice

Not suffering from cold hands or feet

Finding that the roof of their car has got lower after they have had an AT lesson!

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