

## ALEXANDER NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2003

THIS NEWSLETTER IS FOR CLINT EASTWOOD FANS AND PEOPLE EVERYWHERE WHO ARE READY TO CONSIDER NEW WAYS OF DEALING WITH THE STRESS IN THEIR LIFE.

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### 1. CLINT EASTWOOD MAKES OUR DAY

In an interview with Mark Lawson recorded for Radio 4's Front Row on 16.10.2003 Clint Eastwood uttered words that thrilled our little hearts. In one gnomic phrase he summed up the essence of both the Alexander Technique and 'overdoing' when, a propos of his performance in 'A Fistful of Dollars' he observed: 'You can do a lot, without doing a lot, if you know what I mean.'

Clint, we do, we really do. You are a scholar and a gentleman, and we'll always be happy to have you as our AT pupil, because we just adore your pithy turn of phrase (and no, we are not dropping into Nigel-Benn-speak).

But lesser mortals such as we are cannot hope to convey a whole world of thought and emotion simply by clenching our teeth – and it does tend to tighten our jaw, our neck and our whole musculature. So we will put the Hamlet back in its box and humbly attempt to clarify our Clint's utterance.

What Mr Eastwood meant, as we see it, is: 'You can achieve a lot, without indulging in unnecessary activity.' This statement neatly sums up the essence of the Alexander Technique. Most of the time, most of us are involved in significant amounts of superfluous activity around performing routine activities.

An illustration may clarify exactly what we mean by this. Recently, Annie was giving a first lesson to a pupil who has a severe knee problem. This pupil has considerable problems getting in and out of a chair and was very apprehensive about being taken from sitting to standing. Over time she has developed various strategies which include putting one foot in front of the other and pushing down with her hands on the seat of the chair... and becoming understandably anxious about how she will manage it.

In other words, the pupil was starting to do a lot of things in order to perform a single movement. Metamorphosing subtly into her Brisk Old Fashioned English Nanny role - a favourite- Annie encouraged the pupil to stop all the preparatory activity. It was then possible for the pupil to come out of the chair with an ease and lightness she wouldn't have believed possible and the knee problem simply didn't kick in.

This brings us to the other possible interpretation of Clint's oracular words: 'You can do a great deal, without achieving a lot.' This refers to the Headless Chicken syndrome, the theory behind which seems to be: 'If I run round enough and do enough, I'm bound to get done most of what needs to be done. And anyway, it makes me feel as if I'm tackling the problem.'

Underlying the Headless Chicken syndrome is the assumption that there is only one way to address a problem, *so there is no point in stopping to think about it*. Usually this assumption is expressed in terms such as: 'If I don't do this'... or, 'I've got to do this because...'

This month we suggest experimenting with Pareto's rule that 'a minority [20%] of input produces the majority [80%] of results'.

### DEALING WITH STRESS THE CLINT EASTWOOD WAY

Ok, it's true. Clint has fired our imagination this month, not least because we've always loved the way he solves problems. Does Clint get stressed? We don't think so. In our youth, naively, we thought that that was because he carried a 44 Magnum (*'The most powerful handgun in the world'*)- or other 19<sup>th</sup> century equivalent. But age brings wisdom and we now realise that there is more to it than that. It really is a matter of attitude.

Just imagine Woody Allen in the shoes of Dirty Harry. Sure he's got the 44 Magnum, but he also has another day of brutal criminals to face down, people to shoot and a life threatening attack to survive. Instead of 'Make my day, punk', the refrain would be along the lines of: 'Oh no, not again. I shot 20 criminals only yesterday. Don't I ever get a break? How many more years of therapy am I going to need now' etc. etc.

Our dictionary defines stress as: 'a demand on physical and mental energy', but also 'the emphasis laid on a word'. Our definition of stress would be 'the emphasis laid on a situation, which places demands on physical and mental energy'.

Stress has replaced back pain as the major health problem in the workplace. Certainly we have to address the problems that arise, but we have a choice as to how much emphasis or importance we give them. The converse of Pareto's rule is, of course, that 80% of input produces a 20% minority of results.

So what lessons do we draw from Mr Eastwood's example?

First: always take care to narrow the stress down to the day and the specific issue. Notice how quickly body and mind become tense and drained if you allow the stress to spill over into the past and future.

Second: when times get tough, it's ok to reach for your Magnum – white chocolate or dark, a vous de choisir.

### 3. HOW TO HELP YOUR SON WITH STRESS

A young man who'd moved to another town for his job phoned his mother to see how she was.

'Well', she said. 'I'm not too good. I have headaches the whole time. I've been getting pretty tired and I don't seem to have much energy.'

The young man was worried and asked her if she'd seen a doctor.

'No need to trouble the doctor' said his mother. 'At my age you can't expect to feel great all the time. I'll manage.'

The young man asked if she was sleeping.

'I don't sleep much at night', she replied. 'But I keep falling asleep in the chair.'

Seriously worried now, the young man asked her if she was eating.

'I've not eaten anything for the last two weeks' she replied.

'Why not?' the son asked.

'You haven't called for two weeks and you want me to answer the phone with my mouth full?'

### 4. WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO THIS MONTH

Mid-October Annie packed her carpet bag, took her black umbrella and bowler hat and went to Rome to stay with dear friends, Carla and Moreno Bondi. Rome was cold, wet and just as beautiful and thrilling as ever. Annie and her daughter did the sights and the shops and cooked.

On their last morning, a perfect sunny autumn day, they even tried to sample one of Rome's newest attractions: a hot air balloon that flies 150 metres over the Eternal City. Sadly, the impenetrability of Italian bureaucracy meant that boarding the balloon was, like so many seemingly simple things in Italy, barely possible: in short, those who queue long enough and patiently enough, may be rewarded ....eventually.

During Annie's stay Moreno, an outstanding figurative painter ([www.morenobondi.it](http://www.morenobondi.it)), was told that an exhibition of his paintings would be going ahead in Cagliari in December... and that the first press conference was planned for four days hence.

**This meant that Moreno had to have a number of new paintings completed and photographed in very short order, while his wife and agent Carla, had to write press releases, sort out catalogues and arrange a host of other things. As they planned the seemingly interminable list of things to be done over what had started as a quiet lunch in an agreeable pizzeria, their stress levels rose stratospherically.**

**Plans for dinner and even a night's sleep didn't even make it to the back burner. Eventually, slipping into Mary Poppins mode, Annie offered to make dinner to ease the load. Precise inquiries followed as to exactly what would be served that night. Mashed potato was mentioned and heartily endorsed. Nursery food, Annie had thought, was just what the occasion required.**

**The projected dinner was discussed and refined; courses and vegetables considered and selected. At the end of the process, stress levels had dropped considerably. Why? Because another issue had broken the cycle of exclusive, anxious concentration. Mashed potato had served to break the energy draining emphasis on a single situation.**

**Subsequently preparations for the forthcoming exhibition have proceeded successfully and relatively serenely.**

**Have a great November**

**Annie and Madelene**

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