

Daring To Change, Part 2 *Fifty Years With The Alexander Technique* *An Encounter With Judith Stransky*

This is the second half of a two-part interview. Part 1 was published in AmSAT Journal #5, Spring 2014.

by Shulamit Sendowski

Bringing the Alexander Technique to China

In the Fall of 1979, after the United States and China re-established diplomatic relations, the U.S. State Department asked Judith's husband of two years, Dr. Otto Schnepf, a Viennese/Israeli/American Professor at the University of Southern California (USC) Department of Chemistry, to be the first Science Attaché at the United States Embassy in China. The couple lived in Beijing from 1980–1982, shortly after the end of the destructive Cultural Revolution in China.

Before leaving for China, Judith arranged for substitute Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais teachers to replace her at the USC and other places she was teaching. She handed over her Alexander Technique waiting list to ACAT West. Pamela Blanc, newly arrived in Los Angeles from San Francisco, replaced Judith as administrator of ACAT West.

By coincidence, before leaving for China, Judith and Otto met the Chinese Vice Minister of Culture at a USC party in his honor during his U.S. visit, and they discovered that his wife and Otto had been classmates at St John's University in Shanghai. Having fled from Nazi-occupied Vienna, Otto and his parents lived in Shanghai during World War II, under miserable conditions, until 1948. This meeting led to an astonishing reunion in Beijing between Otto and his former Chinese classmates who were now high-level cadres.

In Beijing, Judith persuaded the Vice Minister to arrange for her to give Alexander Technique presentations at the Beijing School of Ballet (which taught both ballet and Chinese folk dance, a very graceful dance form with flowing scarves), and at the Beijing Opera School, where Beijing Opera was taught. This would have been absolutely impossible without this high level connection.

A third presentation was arranged when Judith, to her surprise, met her former New York student, Clara Roesch, at an Embassy welcome party when Clara came to China to teach Western opera. Clara arranged for Judith to present the Alexander Technique at the Beijing Opera Academy, the school where she was teaching. "These were older students, with more tightness in their bodies, than in the other schools," Judith remembers.

"The students and faculty at all three schools were fascinated by the work. The students I worked on reported how

much change they felt. What was extremely moving was the reaction of the teaching staff. It was so poignant. For 34 years, under Communism, they had not been allowed to leave the country and study abroad, nor had anyone been allowed to enter China to bring new teaching ideas. This was food for the soul for them. They were very excited, and very emotional. It was a remarkable experience for me as well.

"In China, I gave private Alexander Technique lessons in our apartment, and I gave Feldenkrais® classes twice a week in Independence Hall at the U.S. Embassy. No Chinese were permitted, but I had a very interesting clientele from the international community in Beijing, with people from other embassies as well as our own, and U.S. and foreign journalists, teachers, and business people. Some of them cried when I was leaving China, as they would no longer have Alexander Technique lessons, saying it had changed their lives.

"I gave Alexander lessons to the Chinese students at the schools, as well as to my jolly, stocky 51-year-old Chinese language teacher who suffered from many years of excruciating back pain. I was astonished at the freedom in their joints! In the West, my students who suffered from tension and/or pain had tight joints, particularly hip joints. Not so in China—every Chinese person I worked on had free soft joints, from hip joints to wrist joints. By the way, my teacher happily reported she was totally free of pain after two Alexander lessons.

"I could write a book about living in Communist China, which was both extremely difficult and very, very interesting. To state it briefly, China was a very drab, depressing Third World Communist country, with some wonderful sights. The difficulties: First of all, the U.S. Embassy building was overcrowded due to lack of space, and the staff worked far longer hours than in other countries. All foreigners had little freedom in China, even though we had more freedom than the Chinese. The Chinese Government controlled everything, even which apartment we lived in. For the first five months, Otto and I were assigned to living in a depressing hotel room at the Peking Hotel. Hotel rooms, offices, and apartments were bugged, including bedroom walls, and phones were tapped, so we had to be very careful what we said when indoors. We could travel only on approved roads, and everywhere else there were signs stating that no foreigners were allowed. We had to learn new bizarre traffic rules in Beijing, such as no headlights at



Judith Stransky

night! We had to go through the government for every request, even for a maid or a cook for a dinner party, and we never knew whether or not the request would be granted, or how long it would take. Travel outside Beijing was restricted; we always had to request permission and were not permitted to take the car, except to the Great Wall. We were not permitted to travel on our own even if we knew the language, and an interpreter/guide was assigned to us in every city, controlling us. I considered it a great coup in my second year, when I could speak some Chinese, that I managed to convince the government to let me take visiting friends traveling on my own without a guide/interpreter. There were no Westernized hotels, so hotels in China were a Third World experience.

“The government was constantly changing its attitude towards Westerners (as well as towards other things), and we never knew whether they would be favorable or unfavorable towards us. Chinese were not permitted to be friends with us. Even high-level cadres had to get a permit to visit us or to meet with us at a private restaurant or banquet. The Chinese in Beijing were surly and unfriendly (except for the officials at our official receptions and banquets, who were enormously friendly and welcoming and thrilled to meet us), and they were obviously pretty miserable, which was heartbreaking for me to see and feel—whereas the further away we went from Beijing, from the seat of government, the more open and friendly and curious and interested the people were—although still restrained—and in Shanghai they were absolutely wonderful, alive and cheerful and helpful, which was a leftover from the influence of the international community that had lived in Shanghai, so that the residents of Shanghai had a different attitude towards foreigners.

“There was little choice of food, and during our first winter, the only vegetable was white cabbage. During our second winter, there was a little more selection in the store for foreigners, because the government had built greenhouses outside Beijing where they grew a few vegetables for the foreigners for winter. Food was seasonal, so there was no fruit during the long winter. The U.S. Embassy in Beijing had no PX, so we were unable to get additional food supplies there. Simple staple items were impossible to get in China, and we all would go to Hong Kong—not for exotic embroideries or jade or ceramics, but to shop at Woolworth’s for items like saltines, shower curtain hooks, and safety pins! That was a running joke among us! And we went to Hong Kong to go to the dentist or for a medical check-up. In Beijing, the government controlled which doctors we were assigned to, and the experience for all of us was that they were only sometimes helpful, regardless of whether they practiced traditional Chinese medicine or so-called “Western” medicine. Dentistry was hopeless.

“The Beijing climate was horrible except for the month of September. The air was polluted with coal dust from nearby factories, and everyone constantly suffered respiratory ailments. We all swore by over-the-counter Chinese respiratory remedies, which were extremely effective, though bitter-tasting, and had weird ingredients, including ox penis, dried cow dung, and ground pearl! To top it off, it was very difficult—and a stimulating challenge—to learn the mores and manners and

navigate among two alien cultures simultaneously: traditional Chinese culture and communist culture. Every Chinese person who was around us had to report on us, which was the MO in China. Also, the Chinese government assumed that Otto was a CIA spy. We had to be very careful how we behaved and what we said. (Otto revealed to me years later that his assistant, a very pretty young blonde, was a CIA spy!) These were the basic difficulties, and there were more.

“On the positive side, from a practical point of view, the cost of living in China was extremely inexpensive, and we saved money. Also, we enjoyed our sunny, cheerful apartment. In addition, I enjoyed the challenge of shopping in Beijing, practicing my Mandarin, searching out interesting stores and items to buy, and bargaining in the newly permitted Free Market and little antique bargain shops. We developed a nice collection of Chinese antiques. We loved bicycling around Beijing, either among the hordes of bicyclists on the main avenues, or bicycling alone on the quiet side streets, and we used the car infrequently. We travelled extensively around

China, mostly on business, and also for pleasure (without having to join a tour group, which was mandatory for others in those days), and loved experiencing the different provinces and exploring the sights, the ancient

art and the folk arts, Beijing Opera, and what remained of traditional Chinese culture. In Beijing there was virtually no traditional Chinese culture, and we had to really search to find anything traditional, although there was a little more still in existence in distant parts of the country.

“We were honored guests when traveling on Embassy business, and treated like royalty. In addition to being hosted at sumptuous and delicious banquets in exclusive restaurants, an important cadre would be assigned to take us sightseeing to very special sights and places of interest that were not on the tourist track. Because Otto had lived in Shanghai and had attended St. John’s University, he was welcomed with open arms and the staff at the universities and institutions opened up their hearts to him, and talked to him far more candidly than they did to any other foreign service officer. Because of this special status, he even influenced one university to improve the awful diet they served the students!

“In Beijing, as members of the U.S. Embassy staff, it was exciting to meet high level Chinese officials together with very impressive delegations from the U.S. and many dignitaries, including President Jimmy Carter and future President George Bush Sr. and their wives, as well as, among others, Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Surgeon General, the Director of the FDA (with whom I had a stimulating dialogue!), Dr. James Watson (Nobel Laureate co-discoverer of DNA)—and Kirk Douglas!

“Otto became known in the science community, both Chinese and international, and I, because of my intense involvement in a fascinating cultural organization founded by the wife of the United Nations Representative, became known in Chinese and international cultural circles.

“We were given a lavish, fairytale farewell dinner reception by the Austrian Ambassador and his wife in their glittering embassy, with dancing to Strauss waltzes, and nine ambassadors were among the numerous guests. To our surprise,

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we found we had made quite an impact on the international community. We were, after all, not the typical foreign service officer and wife.

“It was a huge challenge to develop an interesting and enriching life in Beijing, and I was one of a small number of spouses who succeeded in doing so. Studying Taiji (Tai Chi) and Chinese martial arts was part of that life.”

The Taiji Experience

“I joined Taijiquan (T'ai Chi Chu'an) classes at the International Club two mornings a week. The large classes were taught in Chinese, in a spacious, bright, cheerful hall. The students were a colorful mixed group, including some ambassadors. We were privileged to have been assigned the finest Taiji teachers by the Chinese government, including the five-year Chinese National Taiji Champion, a quiet, impressive man who was our favorite teacher, although for a few months he was not with us, as the Chinese government sent him to teach the Japanese Royal Family.

“Our teachers used new teaching methods—which were not employed in the classes in the parks. These methods were far more effective than the traditional way in making it easier, faster, more meditative, and very pleasant for us to learn. The traditional manner of teaching was that the teacher did the whole form in front of the class, and the class imitated him and learned by constant repetition of following him.

“Our teachers started the class with a few minutes of exercises to loosen up our joints. These exercises were quasi-Chinese and quasi-Western and were practiced gently without strain and with few repetitions. We were initially taught the first Taiji movement, performing it continuously in a meditative manner as one flowing connected movement. Then the second movement was added so then we practiced two movements in a flowing continuum and very meditatively. And so it went on, adding one movement at a time. In the beginning class, our teacher explained the manner and quality of the movements poetically, comparing them to nature, such as moving as gently as the breeze rustling the leaves, or doing a movement like a flower opening up to the sun. In the intermediate class, he described the quality of the movements in the manner of martial arts, that is, defense and attack, which added another more precise component to the quality of our Taiji.

“Interestingly, when our teacher was absent, he was replaced by a new teacher who taught in the traditional way, standing in front of the class, not explaining anything, and expecting us to follow him. Although his Taiji was superb, we were at sea after a few moments, because we had not learned the rest of the movements, and we sorely missed our wonderful teacher. In the next class, the new teacher taught us in the manner we were accustomed to, and he obviously had been instructed to do so. Clearly he was unhappy about it, but fortunately after a while he became used to it and actually came to enjoy teaching in the new manner, and everyone was happy. In fact, he proudly led us in a class demonstration we performed for the international community.

“I noticed that the students who were the very best in class were Asian. Chinese were not permitted in the class, but there was a group of Japanese journalists, male and female. The males were rather awkward, but the petite females, whether slender or stocky, were superb. In contrast, one gentleman who became excellent was the large African ambassador of Sierra Leone, always strikingly clad in a red jogging suit. The ambassadors in the class took it just as seriously as everyone else, and some of them would arrive and depart on their bicycles, as did most of us.

“The Taiji teaching was both practical and spiritual, almost ethereal. In the lovely spring weather, we enjoyed our classes outdoors—on those days when there were no blinding Spring sandstorms from the Gobi Desert—among the flowering bushes of the International Club gardens. Over time, they taught us three different forms of Taiji: the 24, the 48, and another form, one of which had movements that were very different from the other two forms. In our second year, to everyone's delight, they added Taiji Sword. We all loved our classes.”

Martial Arts and Qigong

“I was eager to learn more and requested a private teacher from the Chinese government (this too had to go through the government). After a great deal of negotiation, I finally succeeded. My teacher came two mornings a week. She was from the Beijing School of Physical Culture, where she taught Taiji, Chinese martial arts, and Western sports including swimming, football, and basketball. She was a slender, serious young woman named Wang, who exuded an air of focus and spirituality. The moment I laid eyes on her, I was in awe.

“Our lessons were in Chinese and held outdoors in the huge courtyard of the diplomatic apartment building where we lived.

We practiced together throughout winter and summer, in the snow and the heat! Wang was amazing, with her speed, internal focus, enviable skill, and good use. She taught me additional forms of Taiji, fast sword, and a few forms of martial arts, called Wushu in China. I learned so much, including leaping and twirling swords. It was thrilling! My daily

practice grew longer and longer. When we traveled, I was a solitary figure practicing in hotel corridors and on hotel roofs!

“I had been requesting a Qigong (Chi Gong or Chi Kung) teacher, but was unsuccessful, because the Chinese government refused to let foreigners learn Qigong. I was so disappointed. I had been translating Chinese books on Qigong into English with a translator and had learned that there are innumerable forms of Qigong, each one for a different application, outlined in detail in the books. This was fascinating, but I knew there were some forms that were not in the books.

“One day, Wang announced that she would teach me Qigong. I was ecstatic! She explained that the form she would teach me was exceptional, because it was not intended for a specific condition, but was for general health and well-being. She told me she was one of only 11 people in China who knew this form, and that she learned it from an elderly lady who had selected her students. Wang was honoring me by teaching me this form—once again, a dream come true.

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“I had studied Taiji in Los Angeles, Judo in Paris, Aikido in Hawaii, and Karate in Santa Monica. The Chinese experience was on a level beyond anything I had previously known. The skill and manner of our teachers were unsurpassed. Their use was superb. Among my fascinating experiences during the two years in China, this was a highlight, a spiritual joyousness.”

Let the Neck Be Free—In Chinese

“Before leaving China, I gave Wang two Alexander lessons and a copy of my book on the Alexander Technique, which she would be able to have translated. After I left, we corresponded, and one day she wrote that the government had honored her with an assignment to teach physical culture on TV to the Beijing elementary schools. In China, young children had to sit in class with legs together, arms clasped behind their backs, chest thrust forward and chin up. It was horrifying for me to see the strain in those young bodies when I visited schools. A nice touch was that some teaching was done through song. Wang wrote that she taught them to sit with their hands softly on their thighs, legs somewhat apart, and she taught them the following song, in Chinese: ‘Let the neck be free. Let the head go forward and up. Let the back lengthen and widen.’ This was broadcast on TV to all the elementary school children of Beijing!”

Back to the West Coast

Judith returned to Southern California in 1982 and found it very different than it had been in the 70s. “A number of Alexander teachers had moved here, which was a wonderful surprise. However, disappointingly, the growth centers no longer existed, nor the AHP annual conferences.

“ACAT West was an active group of teachers, meeting together to plan Alexander events for the public. It felt so good not to be alone any longer and to re-experience the group energy I had enjoyed in New York. The first event was held in 1983, in my teaching studio, with a small panel of teachers giving a lecture-demonstration for the public. The studio accommodated 50 chairs. About 80 people showed up, and most of the overflow stood outside the doorway eagerly trying to hear every word. The word was also being spread by more and more individual teachers presenting the Technique to a variety of professional and social groups.”

Westwood Playhouse Event

“The next significant event was an ambitious evening in September 1984 in the 500-seat Westwood Playhouse (now called the Geffen Playhouse). Paul Gleason (a prominent Los Angeles teacher of acting and musical theater who trained with me in the 70s) and I approached VIP students of ours to form a panel to talk about the Technique. Jean-Louis Rodrigue and I were the organizers, and Paul and I were the moderators. Organizing this event took a lot of effort and, together with a public relations person, we succeeded in selling every seat!

“The VIP panel included Nina Foch (Oscar-nominated actress, acting coach, and USC faculty member), Natalie Limonick (President of the Southern California Opera Guild and USC faculty member), Dr. Jeremy Swan (internationally renowned Director of Cardiology at Cedars-Sinai Hospital), and others. Julie Andrews was unable to participate, but wrote a charming letter that was read out to the audience. The actor Tony Perkins was in the audience and stood up, with beautiful use—the audience gasped—and spoke eloquently of his work with the Technique, and of experiencing the lines of the actor’s body to be as important as the lines the actor speaks.

“Dr. Douglass Price-Williams, Professor of Psychology at UCLA, who had trained with FM in London in the 1940s, spoke from the audience in his impeccable British manner. He closed the evening by recounting, with intelligence and humor, the virtues and benefits of the Technique and his personal acquaintance with the work and with F.M. Alexander. A fitting end to a memorable Alexander event! The audience was enthralled by being so

close to the celebrities and hearing their experiences and overview of the Technique.”

Alexander International Congress

“Michael Frederick, a Carrington-trained American teacher in Southern California, had the profound vision and energy to hold an International Congress of Alexander Teachers with a panel of Master Teachers from FM’s early training, making it possible for all teachers globally to encounter them and experience them—an extraordinary event! It was an uphill battle to get them all to agree to attend and form a panel, and I helped Michael convince them. These teachers were the “star attraction” that brought a large number of participants.

“The first Congress was held in 1986 in Stonybrook, New York with 250 participants, and it memorably brought together the ‘elders’ of the Alexander Technique, many of whom had not seen each other in years.”

Judith recalls the opening cocktail mingler, where she saw such venerable teachers as the Barlows, Marjorie Barstow, the Carringtons, and Patrick Macdonald “greet each other happily like old school chums.”

This started the Congress tradition that continues today. “We take these events for granted, but without Michael’s vision and effort, they would not exist. They are a superb gathering place for all of us, enriching the whole global Alexander community.”

Alexander Training Institute of Los Angeles

“In the mid-80s, nine teachers met to form a training school in Southern California: the Alexander Training Institute of L.A. (ATI-LA). We were Pamela Blanc, Lyn Charlsen, Lena Frederick, Michael Frederick, Sydney Laurel Harris, Babette Markus, Frank Ottiwell, Jean-Louis Rodrigue, and me. An exciting difference between our school and other schools was that instead of one or two directors, we had nine directors full of

stimulating ideas and bringing varied teaching styles to the school. We selected Santa Monica, with its fresh sea air, for the location. It didn't happen all at once. There were many organizational meetings, finding and renting a space, and so forth. The school opened in 1987. ATI-LA continues to be the only large, AmSAT certified, on-going training school in Southern California. It has been successful and not only graduates teachers, but also organizes useful and interesting events. I feel proud to have been part of the founding of the school and its activities for many years."

A Way of Teaching

When asked about her way of working, and what guides her, Judith responds: "The simple answer is: To simplify.

"I was told long ago that FM's work in the very last years of his life was simpler than ever before, and that it was the best work he did. By simplifying and making the process easier, one is applying the Pleasure Principle. When I make the lessons as easy and pleasurable as possible, the student responds more rapidly and retains more readily.

"I tell my students that I am not teaching them to use the body differently, I am teaching them to think differently because the body responds to the way we think. This is a cornerstone of Alexander's amazing discovery. Alexander wrote: 'We can throw away the habit of a lifetime in a few minutes if we use our brains' or, as he sometimes stated, 'with the right thinking.'

"The messages (directions) are experienced externally through the teacher's hands and hearing the teacher say the words aloud, and internally through the student saying the words silently. This is how I was taught, and this is how I teach my students. And, as we read in 'The Bedford Lecture,' this is how Alexander taught. I find that the internal/external messaging stimulates a rapid response. I tell my students that the directions can be said in full or abbreviated and are their life-long friends they can call on at any instant in their lives. We find this invaluable.

"It is not easy to make it easy. It requires patience, tact, thoughtfulness, listening to the student, and developing rapport. When it is easy for the student and when there is good rapport, it pays off by having a more responsive and interested student.

"I consider it important to develop rapport with the first phone call. I like to be down-to-earth, from beginning to end, and I immediately ask what is the reason the person wants lessons. Then I explain the work to them, if they need an explanation, relating to their particular issue. I aim to keep the explanation brief and to the point, as I do with answers to their questions. I answer all questions.

"I found with time that students respond far more rapidly in the first lesson if they have first had an explanation of what I am going to do in a lesson. So I schedule a double appointment for the first session, and the first appointment is a free consultation and the second appointment is their first lesson. I immediately ask them what all their issues are, as invariably there are more issues than what they have told me on the phone. I like to keep my part of the conversation brief, pertinent, and to the point, because, although they want answers, they have not come to listen to the teacher talk; they have come to feel better.

However, they usually love to talk about their issues to a willing and understanding listener, and that is the beginning of the rapport. If they complain of neck or back pain when waking up, I immediately address sleep positions and proper mattresses and pillows, which they can instantly put into effect. If they have pain when driving the car, I immediately address the car seat and beneficial habits of driving. If I want to do an alignment evaluation and explanation in front of the mirror, I do it only with their permission.

"When appropriate, I like to bring in humor, and I may even demonstrate the difference between good use and poor use in an amusing manner. I play it by ear as to how I communicate with each person.

"I like to explain that it is a non-doing method and a non-caring method. I explain succinctly what I mean by non-doing, and that there is to be no physical effort and no mental effort; therefore, I don't want them to even try and memorize the words. I explain that they are to leave everything up to me and not care, and the only thing I ask of them is to say the words silently, while I say them aloud. As I find people have a short memory, I frequently remind them of this during lessons.

"To make it easy, I usually give the first one or two lessons only on the table and start chair work when I think it will be easy. If chair work is difficult or unpleasant for the student, I put the student back on the table.

"I consider it very important to make the student comfortable, in order to avoid contraction. For example, if a student has difficulty keeping the knees bent in table work, I prop cushions under the legs. In chair work, if the student has short legs, I place a footstool under the feet. In fact, I recommend a simple footstool for home, office, and plane travel for virtually everyone, because it promotes lengthening.

"I ask the student to let me know immediately if something is uncomfortable and I explain that there is nothing we need to do—if necessary, I can simply place my hands on the student and direct and do nothing more than that.

"I once had a student who could not tolerate having his head touched. I agreed to work with him without touching his head and asked him to say the head directions (silently) very frequently while I said them aloud during the lessons. After a few weeks, he had no difficulty having his head touched—a life transformation for him!

"I use simple, clear verbal language that is easy to understand. I teach people to give themselves only the head-neck-back directions, or abbreviations of it, in daily life, so they are not burdened with directing many parts of the body, and they can direct in an instant without interrupting what they are doing. During lessons, however, I add more directions as appropriate and necessary. There are exceptions. For example, I had a student with MS who would fall after every few steps of walking, was unable to go upstairs without falling down, and had to be virtually carried upstairs. I added additional thoughts for her, which enabled her to walk without falling, and eventually she was able to go up her few steps at home and up my two flights of stairs unhesitatingly. I don't want to state here specifically what those words were, because it is different for different people, and I consider it my task to find the words that will reach each person's specific issue. What I will say here is

"I like to explain that it is a non-doing method and a non-caring method."

that I applied KNOWING HOW TO STOP. I asked her to stop briefly after every two steps, and direct. Because her issues were so serious and she suffered, I made it lighthearted by suggesting a little chant, like a little song. Applying this way of working, she never fell down even on her medically prescribed 20-minute walk. Gradually we could change it to three steps, then to four steps and eventually she did not need to stop. I advised her to stop any time that she felt it would be helpful.

"I find that when people are serious, direction goes dead, so I remind them to not be serious. I teach students to say the words very lightly—playfully—as if they haven't a care in the world—to 'say them and forget them, say them and forget them.' This is my version of FM's 'Don't care a jot' and 'Don't worry.' I call the work Non-Doing and Non-Caring. For everyone, I constantly reiterate: light and playful, easy, toss the words into the air, and I recommend using the word *free* especially when they are in a tense situation or feel pain coming on. I create simple additional directions for performing artists, athletes, etc., who are using the body in ways beyond daily life activities.

"I address everything a person does in life. I sometimes go to the student's home, office, car, and/or gym. I have rearranged furniture, for example, for watching TV, or for the computer. I have worked out for myself, and for my students, the best positions for maintaining good use in practical daily life, including driving, gardening, brushing teeth, writing, eating, emptying the dishwasher, sleeping, playing a musical instrument, playing sports, public speaking, and so on. Occasionally a student has a different problem that requires me to put on my thinking cap to figure it out.

"I honor what the student thinks or experiences and see myself as guiding the student to think in a new way and to experience an improvement that would not come on his or her own. To quote Alexander: 'All that I am trying to give you is a new experience.' When a student has a good experience, I do not repeatedly try to reproduce it; instead, I let it linger as we move on to something else and may return to it later. I do the same when a student is not responsive: I do not make the student feel wrong—instead, I move on to something else and return later. I do not subscribe to the word or concept of resistance. We work with whatever presents itself.

"I recall Patrick Macdonald saying: 'If at first you don't succeed, never try again—the same way.'

"I teach my students to avoid words that have a contrary effect on the body (such as the word 'try'), to avoid ambiguous words, and to keep it simple. I have occasionally used an image when a student encountered a block, but I do not find visualization of long-term help. The directions are reliable for long-term help. As I became more experienced, I did not need to use an image. I like to avoid using negative words; for example, instead of saying 'Your right leg is tighter than your left leg,' I prefer to say, 'Do you notice how free your left leg is?' And if I wish I may add, 'And your right leg is likely to become more and more free.'

"When students concentrate too much on directing and the body is not responding, I ask them to silently give the directions to someone else in the room. If they are driving, I suggest they give the directions to the driver in the car in front of them. This is invariably successful. Also, I explain to all students that saying the words silently is more efficient and more effective than saying them aloud.

"I have also found that bringing in the visual process is significantly helpful. I learned from Judy Leibowitz to have mirrors in my room and when someone's alignment is very good I ask that student to look in the mirror to see it as well as feel it. I also include pointing upwards when I say lengthening up, and pointing forward and up for head going forward and up, and pointing to shoulders widening out. In more than one instance, this has contributed to a breakthrough."

From Debbie Caplan, Judith learned how to work with a scoliotic curve. "Instead of thinking of trying to straighten the curve, I think of the curve getting longer in the curved direction. I apply the same thinking to torticollis and other comparable conditions, thinking of lengthening in the direction of the condition. This works and it validates Alexander's discovery of avoiding end-gaining and relying on the right thinking."

Judith also teaches her students the difference between doing and non-doing. Her way of inhibiting the doing in herself is: "Instead of thinking of my hands doing the work, I think of the words doing the work, provided, of course, that the hands and wrists are free, and the whole body is in good use. I consider it essential to direct myself while teaching, not only when my hands are on the student, but also when they are off the student—essentially, the whole time the student is with me... in fact, in all of life. I have experienced teachers working on me who directed only when their hands were on me, and I was alternately lengthening and contracting, instead of lengthening continuously."

When Judith is asked how important she thinks it is to practice a variety of forms such as "monkey," "lunge," etc., her response is: "In a nutshell, I have found that it is the directions that are essential, and what I mean by that is that the teacher has to work on the student with direction, which was the essence of my training. I have encountered students who went to teachers who did nothing but take the person in and out of the chair and other students who experienced nothing but table work, and they all received benefits, and I could feel direction in them. This indicated to me that the teachers they went to worked on them with direction. When I added a larger repertoire of working with them, they experienced even greater benefit, beyond what they had known."

Judith learned a simple effective shortcut to "Head forward and up" from Patrick Macdonald. "Patrick would ask the student to let the chin lower slightly, while directing length upwards. This instantly releases the occiput, which frees the neck, which allows the head to go forward and up, which allows the back to lengthen and widen. This is not a 'doing'—it is undoing the tightness and shortening in the back of the neck, and our work—and the directions—are all about undoing poor

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words very lightly—playfully—as if they
haven't a care in the world...."**

habits.” She subsequently realized for herself that this must be why FM put “neck free” first. From an interview with Marjory Barlow she learned that it was Patrick who, in his early twenties, while on the training course, declared that the head moved “forward and up” from the occipital joint, and not from the hump. Prior to this, according to Marjory, “the students were totally confused. All of a sudden, with Patrick’s discovery of the ‘occipital key,’ they all knew how to work.”

Pain

When asked about working with people in pain, Judith mentions, among others, the rock drummer Alex Van Halen who “suffered incredible pain in his whole body and was unable to play.” Judith watched a tape of him playing and saw “a particular habit that was not obvious in the lessons.” She was able to help him be pain free and to go on the next tour.

“I don’t play tennis or golf, or drums, or the piano, and I am not a dancer, but I have helped athletes, dancers, actors, etc. who are in pain. After a few initial lessons, I ask the student to demonstrate the activity in my teaching room, so I can see the poor use. Musicians can bring their musical instruments, except, of course, the piano.”

The positional changes Judith makes in the musician’s body/arms/hands/fingers relative to the musical instrument are all in the service of “achieving more length, width, and freedom”—freedom of movement, freedom from pain, leading to the bonus of freedom of tone in the musical instrument.

One student with back pain “told me that the pain was relieved as a result of the lessons, except when she lifted weights, and she refused to give up weight-lifting. I asked her to bring her weights to her next lesson, and she staggered in with 200 lb. dumbbells!” Judith taught her to lift the weights without contracting her back. The result: “No more pain!”

“Once again I credit Deborah Caplan for invaluable advice when she said to do far less when working on people with pain. She advised when working on a person with symptoms from nerve involvement, not to move the spine at all. Following her advice, I have even worked on bed-ridden people scheduled for surgery, and I simply laid my hands on the head and directed, without moving the torso or head. First, I gently bend the knees and place a lot of pillows under them, and then gently take out the shoulders. In each case, the person improved and did not require surgery. I also addressed other specifics, including exercise and positions for sex. I address each situation individually. With regard to exercise, I spell out a very, very gradual program; and when students adhere to this program, they do not relapse and eventually are able to resume a full program of exercise without pain.

Judith pays close attention to the environment surrounding people in pain. She does not refrain from practical advice and recommendations. She is aware of the aggravation that furniture can cause our bodies. Her students have learned to consult her prior to purchasing a new chair, sofa, car, bed, or exercise equipment. Some of her ex-students still consult her to this day.

Judith tells her students to “replace soft foam in their seat cushions with high density extra firm foam.” She recommends

“chairs without a lumbar support” and advises them “to have the back of the car seat almost vertical.” She suggests putting “some padding (not thick) behind the upper back, when sitting in a poorly designed chair,” and explains the disadvantages of various kinds of lumbar and neck supports. She recommends everything she can to “allow the back to lengthen and the neck to be free.”

“You can have a hundred Alexander lessons, but if you have furniture that contracts the body, use harmful sleeping positions, or have other issues in daily life that sabotage the good use, you will not be totally free of pain on a lasting basis.

“First through Feldenkrais®, then through Alexander, I developed great awareness of the effect of everything we do and encounter in our daily lives. First, I helped myself, outside of the lessons, and then I helped my students. For example, I offer a variety of ways to sit or sleep at home or on a plane that allows the back to lengthen and widen, and I also make it clear which positions contract the body.

“My aim is to explain everything simply, clearly, and precisely, no mystical or complex explanations. What helps me develop rapport with my students is to relate to their particular way of thinking, their life style, and their use in life. When they ask a question, I give a clear, direct answer. To sum up, I like to make the lessons easy, and bring joy into the lessons.”

Children

“Children have a brief attention span, including lethargic and hyperactive children, so I schedule shorter lessons—the younger the child, the shorter the lesson. I ask a young child to bring in two games or toys. I have my hands on the child while the child plays, quietly saying the words without asking the young student to repeat them. Older children are asked to say the words. Then once or twice I ask for a minute on the table and a minute on the chair, giving assurance that the child will return to playing immediately after. When tired of the first game, the child can play with the second game.

“This works like a charm and the lessons are easy and fun for both the child and for me,” Judith says, recalling with a laugh an early frustrating situation of “chasing a hyperactive child around the room to try and get my hands on her.” Children and teens “from a family where a parent or older sibling has had lessons are happy to be there.” Not so with those who are singled out as the only family member taking lessons: “I have to be creative in finding ways to involve them.

“Children, in my experience, respond so rapidly—no matter how serious the issues—that they do not need many lessons. Frequency and regularity are essential.”

Regularity of Lessons

Judith finds regularity of lessons essential. “In most instances, I ask people to come twice a week. However if one can come for lessons only once a month, it is far more effective to come regularly rather than irregularly.

“For those who cannot afford to take Alexander twice a week, I recommend supplementing with Feldenkrais® group classes once or twice a week (with the exception of those for

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whom lying on the floor and doing movements is too painful), which cost far less than private lessons. Alexander and Feldenkrais® are the only two approaches I know that are a re-education, and one complements the other.”

A Life's Work

“The Southern California community of Alexander Technique teachers continues to grow and flourish. The Technique is included in universities, pain clinics, physical therapy institutes, and elsewhere. Physicians, physical therapists, and teachers of the performing arts and athletics refer to the Alexander Technique. This is a far cry from those early days in New York.

“Our community of teachers here is very active and has been involved in the transition from ACAT to NASTAT to AmSAT. The Training School is also very active.”

Judith has gradually retired from organizational work and from ATI-LA, leaving it in the good hands of the younger generation. Though “officially retired since 2009,” after 45

years of teaching, and having moved “to the quiet beauty of Palm Desert,” Judith is still always available to anyone who seeks her out for lessons. “The Alexander Technique is my life’s work,” she says. A life of daring to change in numerous ways and at different times, daring to take risks to follow a vision guided by thought and meaningful principles, inspiring those she comes in contact with.

Shula Sendowski (ATI-LA, 1991) teaches in Los Angeles County. Shula's essays on “External and Internal Focus” were published in AmSAT News, No. 83, Summer 2010 and AmSAT Journal, No. 1, Spring 2012.

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