

Excerpts From The Book

Excerpt from *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live*, published by Marlowe and Co., an imprint of Avalon Publishing, 2007. All rights reserved.

Testimonials... I. INTRODUCTION

Make the most of yourself, for that is all there is of you.

— R. W. Emerson

There is a poster of Michael Jordan on the wall in my teaching room that I like to show my students. Jordan is three feet off the ground, suspended in the air halfway between the foul line from which he has departed and the basket toward which he is aiming and soon to dunk the ball. He is as close to a human bird as I have seen—a massive, four-limbed bird in improbable flight. There are many striking aspects to this picture: Jordan's height in the air; the distance he has traveled and has yet to travel, airborne, en route to the basket; his strong, upright torso. Most astonishing is the expression on his face. It is apparent that his mind is not focused on his body. He is not feeling what his legs are doing, checking out where his arms are going, or wondering where he will land. His mind is focused on the basket as every part of his body fulfills his purpose in easy and fluid coordination, following the direction of his mind's intent.

"Wow! How does he do that?" my students ask in a tone of wonder. The next question is spoken slowly, with a distant note of self-reproach: "Why can't I do that?"

It is my job to answer their questions, but I am not a basketball coach, exercise trainer, or sports psychologist. Nor are my students necessarily athletes. They are anyone and everyone. They come from all ages, backgrounds, and occupations, and they come for many reasons. I teach the Alexander Technique—a method that explores how you do what you do.

The Alexander Technique teaches you to improve your movement skill in activities such as standing, sitting, walking, running, lifting, playing an instrument, hitting a ball, jumping. It teaches you to reduce unnecessary tension and to move with balance and coordination. More important, by learning to improve how you use your body, you also learn to improve how you use your mind. The Alexander Technique teaches you to better understand yourself, physically and mentally. This deeper self-knowledge becomes a tool that lets you play a greater part in recovering from injury, maintaining health, improving posture, learning new skills, ageing gracefully, and achieving a deeper sense of wellbeing. Whatever your age, whatever your background and interests, the Alexander Technique lets you explore your mind-body connection to help you achieve self-mastery.

For example, how do you stand? Do your feet turn out or point straight ahead? Are your shoulders pulled back, or forward, or lifted? How does your head sit on top of your neck? Is it tilted backward or forward? Is it rotated? Do you stand like your best friend? Do you stand efficiently, with almost no effort in your muscles and an easy lightness throughout your body? Or do you stand with your knees locked, pelvis pushed forward, spine compressed, and jaw clenched? How did you learn to stand? Do you know whether this is important? Perhaps you find such questions bewildering. You just stand. You do not think about it. What more is there to say? In fact, there is a great deal to say, observe, and learn.

This book explores how you stand, and, by extension, how you do anything you do. This means we will look at how you use your mind, and how you use your body, and how they interact to create your behavior. We will approach this topic by learning about a method developed at the turn of the last century by F. M. Alexander, known today around the world as the Alexander Technique. Alexander was an actor with a vocal problem. To recover his voice, he did a simple thing—he studied himself in a mirror—and made important discoveries about how our thoughts and movements are bound together to create our unconscious way of using ourselves that can lead to injury, undermine our health, and limit what we are able to learn and accomplish. Then he discovered how we can bring our thoughts and movements to a conscious level, and tease them apart to enhance both how we think and how he move.

Today, more than fifty years since his death, people all over the world and from all walks of life are learning Alexander's method of self-study to improve how they function. Well-known past and current students of the Technique include John Dewey, George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Kevin Kline, William Hurt, Mary Steenburgen, Rene Fleming, and Robertson Davies. Alexander teachers are employed at many of the leading performing arts schools around the world, including Juilliard, NYU, UCLA, and London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Since you cannot experience this hands-on method by reading about it, I have done the next closest thing. I have compiled a collection of true stories drawn from more than thirty years of teaching experience to show you this learning

process in action. You will meet John, who suffers from a frozen shoulder, and Erin, who has chronic back pain that prevents her from playing tennis. You will meet Bruce, a pianist with performance anxiety, and Ed, who suffers from inexplicable arm pain. You will meet Nancy, a dancer who has trouble balancing on one leg, Nathan, a teenager who wants to improve his pitching, Joan, who is virtually paralyzed by fear, and Greg, an actor with a flat and stilted voice. [*] These and other stories show students learning the Alexander Technique as they acquire the skills to change lifelong patterns of mental and physical behavior that have been undermining how they function.

In addition to the stories, the book draws from my personal study of the Technique and from recent research in neuroscience to shed light on what Alexander discovered but could not fully explain. The book breaks new ground as it probes deeply into the two essential but little-known cognitive skills that are central to the method: Inhibition, a type of thinking that prevents unwanted tension, unnecessary emotional reaction, and maladaptive behavior; and direction, a type of spatial thinking that enhances our balance and coordination as we move. The book discusses the physiological basis of these skills, and how they improve physical performance and brain functioning.

The book also includes a series of Self-Experiments that allow you to explore your mind-body connection to discover how your mind and body connect and interact, and teach you the skills for self-mastery. You will learn to: rest your back and strengthen your back muscles; observe your movement habits in action; inhibit and direct; and apply your new cognitive skills in simple and everyday activities.

Since this is an Introduction, I will not yet venture into the subject of how you stand, or precisely how you do the things you do, but begin instead with a question: Have you ever noticed that, even though you have been making decisions about moving your body throughout your day, virtually every day of your life, you do not know very much about how you do this? How does a mere thought trigger nerves to send their electrochemical signals, so that a simple decision (I want to stand) becomes a physical act (I am standing)?

Although this question might be approached through complicated explanations of neurological functioning and muscle anatomy, I am going to offer you a simple metaphor: How you move—the way that you do what you do—is information that is locked away in a black box within you, hidden beneath your conscious awareness. It is so hidden from view that you do not even realize you lack this understanding—not on a scientific level—but on a level of simple self-observation and awareness. Nor are you likely to notice this essential mystery within yourself until, one day, you experience a problem such as an injury, chronic pain, or some other physical or psychological limitation that prevents you from being able to do what you want to do.

Perhaps one day you bent down to pick up a sock and felt a sudden, stabbing pain in your lower back and crumpled to the floor. Why did this happen? Perhaps when you were young you sat easily at your desk and studied all night, but now, decades later, you often find yourself in pain as you sit at your desk. Why is this happening now? Perhaps you are learning to play a musical instrument. Your teacher explains what your fingers and arms must do but you cannot make them obey. It seems impossible to do what you are told to do, despite your sincere efforts. Why aren't you able to learn to do this? Perhaps you slipped one day on the ice, falling and breaking your leg. Months later your leg has healed, but whenever you walk any distance you experience pain. Why doesn't it get better?

Perhaps you suffer from any of a myriad musculoskeletal injuries: tendonitis, arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis elbow, ruptured disk, or repetitive strain injury, which are not helped very much by pain medication, exercises, or even surgery. Is there anything else that can be done? Perhaps you are a musician, dancer, actor, or athlete. You understand that you have learned to move your body in a way that is inefficient and even harmful, but you cannot stop moving in your usual way. Why is it so difficult to change?

Once we experience a physical injury, or have difficulty learning a skill, or discover the frustration of not being able to do what we try to do, we start to wonder why this is happening. But finding the answer is not easy. We may begin by seeking help from doctors, psychologists, or other health professionals, but this often means being treated for symptoms rather than addressing their source, or analyzing our behavior rather than learning the skills for change. We may exercise to strengthen specific muscles, but this does not teach us to coordinate our entire body as we move. We may try harder and practice longer, but this does not help us to understand our unconscious, harmful patterns of tension, or how to correct our skewed self-conceptions.

Worse, when our efforts do not succeed, we tell ourselves that we are the way we are because of our fate or genes, resigning ourselves to our problem because we are convinced there is nothing more we can do. Or we assume our partial self-understanding and limited self-awareness is the best we are capable of, and so believe we cannot search any more deeply into ourselves to find the cause of our problem. Or we are afraid to probe too deeply, fearful of what we will discover.

However, there is an option besides fatalism, passive acceptance, or fearful withdrawal. There is the possibility of finding our hidden box, learning to open it, and peering inside to discover its secrets. Here we find the realm where our thoughts, feelings, actions, and beliefs intermingle. This is the area of dynamic interaction and connection between the many aspects of our selves. It is also the realm of misconnection, where the mind misperceives the body's feelings, where the

body fails to respond skillfully according to the mind's intent, where misconceptions lead us astray, and where imagined fears stop us in our tracks.

If we can learn to perceive these misconnections, however, we discover that we have been unwittingly creating and/or compounding the problems from which we suffer. Then we are ready to begin learning the skills for restoration and reconnection. With awareness, our conscious mind can become a tool for change. We can consciously learn to shift our perceptions and better understand our feelings. We can consciously learn to perceive our body more accurately and objectively. We can learn to stand and to move with greater efficiency, balance, and coordination. Our body can become better able to do as we intend.

Where is such knowledge and skill to be found? This is the territory into which the Alexander Technique ventures, a method not of self-absorption but of self-understanding; not of treatment and exercise but of skilled, effective bodily control; not of intellectual self-analysis but of experiential learning that teaches us how to identify and release our harmful reactions to pain, fear, and anxiety. The Alexander Technique teaches us to look more deeply into ourselves, and to better operate the self from within. *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live* shows you how.