

A Technique for Being Natural

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by David M Mills, PhD

American artist and art teacher, Robert Henri, wrote in *The Art Spirit* that every brush stroke in a painting is a record of the whole of the artist at the moment it was painted. The same could be said of the quality of a dancer's every step, an actor's every word or gesture or a musician's every note. Whatever the art form, what seems to draw us most powerfully, and move us most deeply, is the simple quality of coordinated human expression, the deep simplicity of a whole person expressed *through* their performance. And this is just as true for other fields of human endeavor that we don't normally think of as "the arts." When we have the good fortune to witness that kind of performance, we are tempted to ask, "What does that person have that I don't?" But each one of us *is* such a whole person. The kind of simple expressiveness that characterizes the best performance is, in fact, our natural condition. It is simply the product of the coordinated functioning of a whole human organism, and if it does not seem to be present, then we are *doing* something to prevent it. The irony for most of us is that it is the very way in which we make our best effort to perform well that does prevent such fully coordinated functioning and such free expression. So perhaps what we ought to have asked is, "What am I doing that is preventing me from performing like that? And how do I learn to stop doing it?" Those of us who teach might ask similar questions on behalf of our students, "How is their interfering with their general coordination preventing them from carrying out my specific instructions? How is their effort to learn interfering with their learning?" Why do we or our students find things so difficult?

The excellent little book, *The Pianist's Talent*, quotes Louis Kentner:

There is no such thing as a 'difficult' piece. A piece is either impossible—or it is easy. The process where-by it migrates from one category to the other is known as practicing.

This is so for any other kind of piece as well. However, if our practice involves muscular activity which interferes with our general coordination, we become more and more skilled at getting in our own way. It even comes to "feel right" to employ our particular pattern of counterproductive effort.

No matter what the specific issue at hand, whether to do with technique, expression, or performance anxiety, it is the level of our general coordination that sets the limits on the quality of our performance. Nor is the matter limited to those who play the piano, or even to performers; every one of us faces it in every act of our lives. What then is to be done? How do we help ourselves and our students out of this dilemma?

In the early 1890's, F.M. Alexander was a talented young Australian actor beset with vocal difficulties in performance. Unable to find relief through the usual medical channels, he set about a rigorous, systematic study of himself in action. The principles of whole human functioning that he discovered, and the method he evolved for applying them to his own action, are the foundation of what is now known as the Alexander Technique. Alexander found that his specific vocal problems were the product of his misdirected way of "using himself" as a whole. Because this "habitual general manner of use" had come to feel right and normal to him, he was at first completely unable to prevent it. Indeed the harder he tried to do what he thought was right, the more he relied on his old "wrong use" in order to do it. He eventually succeeded by finding a way of making his means more important than his end, that is, of

refusing to do what he felt was right and instead to direct himself toward the *quality* of movement that was most conducive to his own best functioning.

In 1955, the year F.M. Alexander died, the American psychologist, George Kelly published his two volume *Theory of Personal Constructs*. Kelly's approach takes each individual to be a "personal scientist," constructing personal meaning and anticipating events in their own life on the basis of the dimensions of that meaning. From this perspective we can see the open, experimental quality of human expression, and indeed of human *learning*, as natural attributes of *being* human. Practiced in the light of Kelly's ideas, Alexander's technique becomes what philosopher John Dewey thought it could be—an essential research tool for a new kind of science of whole human experience. It is thus also a tool for learning to be more natural in all of our actions.

Practicing this new 'personal science' in the context of preparation and performance can have a number of benefits: increased technical capacity, increased expressive power, less strain in preparation and the ability to transform performance anxiety into useful creative energy. Practicing it in the context of the daily activities of life can lead to greater grace and ease, more satisfaction and practical freedom, more natural quality in whatever we chose to do.