

IN OUR HANDS

by Catherine Kettrick, Ph.D.

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For Marjory Barlow, Walter Carrington, Richard (Buzz) Gummere, Elisabeth Walker, Erika Whittaker and Peggy Williams, our present was their future.¹

What did these people who have spent most of their lives with the Technique think about the future of the work as they lived it in their present? What might they see as its future today? This interview presents some of their thoughts on the work, its development and its future.

Catherine: What prompted you to begin studying this work, or decide to train?

Erika: I had nothing else to do, quite simply. My Auntie Ethel had taught me from when I was eight years old, about keeping my length, and not coming down, whatever it was I was doing. That was very firmly ingrained into me. And Auntie Ethel could only think of one thing, and that was Alexander, so when F.M. was going to start a training course I thought, "Hooray, that's all right, I'll join." I really don't think I could have done anything else.

Peggy: My first husband had a very bad stammer. He went for lessons, and he raved about it. Then when I started he suddenly went off it altogether. So although it was a terrible marriage, it was really wonderful because it changed all my life.

Elisabeth: Well, I was a radiographer and very interested in the medical field, but I met my husband in Scotland playing golf, and he'd taken some lessons from Alexander because he'd read in *The Use of the Self* about keeping your eye on the ball. Then he decided to take the training course and persuaded me to do the same. I was really pushed into it. And he largely took the training course to improve his golf and then he almost gave up golf and trained other people.

Marjory: It was the ideas in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* that attracted me. At the age of 16 I just went over the edge because I was so excited about the ideas. I had a very bad back--I was in constant pain. But it never occurred to me when I asked to see FM with an idea of going into the work that it would help me with my back. It wasn't until I gradually began to change and my back began to get better that I made the connection. I began regular lessons, helped with the Little School, and became a general dogsbody at Ashley Place, and eventually joined the first training course in 1933.

Walter: My mother had poor health, and went for lessons with Alexander, and my form master went as well. And so, seeing what happened to my mother and what happened to him, I was very pleased to have the opportunity to have some lessons. One thing led to another and I decided yes, that's what I wanted to do, to train.

Buzz: My mother had a lot of illnesses also, and began seeing AR, who was in Boston at the time. And I felt perfectly healthy, but I began to be frustrated in a mysterious way—I had malaise. So I went to A.R. for a lesson, and after one hour, I went a little crazy, I think. He gave me the psycho-physical freedom of a Neolithic hunter in one hour, a tremendous experience. And I thought, "The whole human race needs this!" I didn't picture myself passing it on at that point, but I thought, "I must learn this!"

Catherine: When you began studying the Technique did you think about the future, and what the Technique might be like ?

Marjory: I don't think people realised what a pioneering situation it was. I suppose because of the respect that F.M. had earned from the hoi polloi we may have harboured thoughts of a large scale movement, but how this work could ever have been disseminated on a large scale is beyond me. We were busy trying to work out what the work was, never mind what it might become.

Peggy: The only thing I decided about the future was that the three years were going to do me a lot of good.

Erika: I didn't look to the future either. I took it very much as it was.

Elisabeth: When I started I valued the experience, I valued the lessons, but I didn't really look ahead. I had really no other thoughts than learning it, and hopefully attempting to teach it somewhere, but I didn't look 60 years ahead, I'm afraid. I was very much in the moment.

Walter: There wasn't really much looking forward into the future in the few years leading up to World War II. Everybody was conscious that the war was threatening and likely to come, and at that time, I didn't really imagine very much about the future of the Technique.

Buzz: But I thought that by this time--well, I realised before long that the babies all had it. Every infant born, they all have perfect use. If the Earth is being populated each day, by thousands upon thousands of infants, who all have this, there's no reason they should lose it. So I figure, what the heck, it's not going to be terribly difficult for the work to spread. Now that was naive. But I saw after my first lesson that it was a significant new development for the human race. I was convinced of it then, and I'm convinced of it now. Of course there was only Frank Jones and me to teach it to the world, but we figured others would join after the war.

Catherine: What about the future from here? Where do you see the work going, or where do you think it should go?

Marjory: Personally, I would like to see the work evolve toward a deeper penetration of what FM discovered, rather than toward a diluted, homogenised continuum with other disciplines. People have narrowed their outlook over the years, and now often dismiss his views on evolution, freedom, political life as "old hat".

Buzz: I think perhaps the computer—that magical contraption—will be a help in getting people to reconsider their manner of reaction to stimuli. Not necessarily in contact with the person, but somehow analysing their responses and so on.

Walter: Well, I think there's going to be a breakthrough sooner than we expect, and it will be in the form of the health professionals and so on coming round to the idea that the principles of the Technique ought to be recognised and that it ought to form part of their training and part of their work.

Catherine: A paradigm shift?

Walter: Quite right. When it's seen how fundamental the functioning of the postural mechanism is to the human organism, then of course there will be quite a lot of shift in the whole outlook. When doctors are carrying out their diagnoses they will be doing very much more of what Alexander says in *The Use of the Self* that they ought to be doing, which is estimating people's use of themselves.

Catherine: They don't notice it now.

Walter: No, they don't. But when they do begin to see that then it will go right through altogether. When that happens, we'll need a lot more teachers. I'm very optimistic about it.

Marjory: I think if anything there are too many teachers, and that the quality of training has fallen over time.

Buzz: And I think we need to refine the teaching techniques, they need great change. You know, I think that the Technique is too much like what it was back then. I don't see any kind of organic development in it. At some point, I don't know when, I began thinking it ought to develop, that it ought to be better, that the teaching of it should be better.

Peggy: Well, I'm sure the work will go on. There seem to be many different ideas about the work, but the essence of it is there. I think also that you apply it as you as a person understand it, and it's a very individual thing. I mean one hopes we'll keep to the principles, but how you apply them is how you are yourself.

Marjory: I'm disappointed that the principles of the Technique haven't been applied consistently in the Alexander world to keep the work on track and to prevent the schisms and traditions that have arisen. Take for instance the explosion of books on the Technique.

Elisabeth: Yes, when I was in Switzerland last week I picked up a book, and there was nothing about inhibition, but there were lots of pictures of how to sit right, and that's a total misunderstanding of F.M.'s principles.

Marjory: Most of what's written is written around the work, and doesn't help you to apply it. And without application the work doesn't exist. It's a life skill in the most profound sense.

Catherine: So for you, this work is more of a vocation than a professional career?

Marjory: It has to be a vocation, ultimately.

Buzz: It can only really grow as a way of life. Erika said that at the second Congress in her keynote address, and repeated it last year, that what Alexander had discovered should not be made a technique, become professional.

Erika: It's definitely not a profession, and I think it's a disaster that this word Technique has come about, because there is no technique. It's a way of thinking what you're about, of knowing what you're about. With the accident I've had, for instance, I've found out that my "profession" goes on all the time. I've had to train myself to go up and down stairs. And I've had a problem here because the ladies say: "Oh, you must be very careful, people have falls on the stairs." Well, they're all old ladies here, you see, and everybody sooner or later has a nasty fall, and: "We can't have people falling around here, you must take the lift." Well, I couldn't see any sort of reason in

that, so I just paid no attention. I just kept walking up and down the stairs, but you have to think all the way. That's what I'm doing now, so I don't think it's a profession.

Peggy: A person needs to have a calling to be a teacher. I suppose the difference—well, you know when you hear somebody giving a piano recital, and you really know it's coming from them, and there are others who are technically very good, and there's nothing there, well, it's like that I think.

Catherine: So there may be teachers who are technically good, but...

Peggy: But there's nothing behind it, they're spiritless. It's important to both have a warmth towards people, and of course to love your work.

Elisabeth: I think this thing about whether it's a profession or a career, I think it's all mixed up in one. I feel we are professional, but I think it's also our careers, you can't draw a line between.

Catherine: Alexander talked about conscious guidance and control as a plane to be reached, rather than a method of reaching it. What do you see as that plane? And if we ever reach it, will we still need teachers?

Elisabeth: I understand it as a satisfactory standard of use, the conscious psycho-physical balance of the whole organism.

Marjory: My understanding of it is that there is a process—inhibition and direction—which fosters a heightened condition of consciousness. It's an indirect process, and by following these indirect means, we arrive at a place where we find ourselves using increasingly conscious guidance and control.

Catherine: So the method for reaching the plane would be his Technique, and once we've learned it and are skilled at it, we've reached this plane, but we still have to employ the Technique to remain there?

Elisabeth: Yes. I remember asking F.M. if he still gave his directions. "I daren't not," he said. So we'll continue to use it. I always think of it as a tool, not an end in itself, but a tool for whatever we want to do.

Walter: It's an evolutionary and developmental process.

Catherine: So eventually, in evolution, perhaps hundreds of years down the road, Alexander believed that we might evolve to this plane?

Walter: Yes, that's right. And I think that individuals do make that sort of progression. And I wouldn't say there'll be no need for teachers, but I think it will be part of education, so that when people are teaching—whether they're teaching scholastic subjects, or physical training, or so on—it will form a natural part of what they're teaching. I see it as the principles being much more widely recognised and applied, and when that happens there won't be a need for specific teachers of the Technique as such.

Catherine: Speaking of teachers leads me to think about training teachers and the different formats we have now for training. What do you think of these various formats?

Marjory: I think the apprenticeship method of training has a lot going for it. After all, some of the greatest teachers learned that way—A.R. for instance. It's good because you see people working in a real situation—a training course is always somehow artificial, don't you think? I've brought it up once or twice with STAT, but there is always a significant silence in response. It doesn't fit the mould.

Walter: For one or two individuals apprenticeship may be fine, but training courses need a minimum of 1600 hours over three years.

Elisabeth: I think one could be trained in the apprentice style by a good teacher who would take the time to teach the student. But they're not going to learn just by watching the teacher. They've got to have the hands on experience. I think training courses give more opportunity for putting hands on, hands on other students, hands on members of the public, and then lots of sharing of questions and answers—that's such an important part of training. And it's wonderful as the teacher to hear all these, because they'll come up with one's private pupils and so on.

Buzz: That question—it's not an unimportant question by a long shot, but it's relatively trivial if we don't know what is this thing we're trying to understand and teach. And I don't want to knock people who are running schools that are fairly conventional and fairly close to what they think Alexander's teacher training course was like. I was in it, in Boston, in the early 1940s. Now F.M. had a terrific spirit. He was a vital, lively sparkling man. He loved socialising, I think. And Erika made a point at the Congress last year that F.M. was really doing something that at its best was a social relationship with another person, or a group of people. Therefore the more a school approximates that—a tea party—the more is going to be learned about this mysterious thing.

Erika: The first year on the training course I remember as being enormous fun. The very first day the three of us—George Trevelyan, Marj Barstow and I—sat in the little back room, and I think we sat on the table swinging our legs, and waiting for the great moment when we would start the training course. Then we went into F.M.'s room and we had a chair each, you see, and he said: "Well you've never done this before, and I have never done this before, we'll see what happens." No rules, regulations, nothing at all. Every morning we had two hours with him, he went round and round, just doing us one by one, and occasionally talking about something. And when we wondered what we should do in the afternoon he said: "It's up to you, go away, don't want to see you." And it was like that the whole way.

Catherine: Since we do have training programs using different formats and curricula, is there anything we can or should do to ensure the quality of graduates, regardless of how they were trained?

Elisabeth: No guarantee, no guarantee.

Walter: Only the individual Head of Training can ensure the quality of graduates.

Marjory: There's no insurance, is there? We cannot ensure the quality of any graduate unless we return to F.M. and his books and see the essence of what he was doing, then try those careful experiments ourselves in the first person.

Catherine: Elisabeth, you mentioned something about hands on experience for students in a training course. Do you think a person could learn the principles of the Technique without any direct hands on experience?

Elisabeth: I think it depends on their use. I mean, there are a few that have good balance, and psycho-physical awareness, but I think the majority need some hands on.

Catherine: So if they're not interfering with their co-ordination to start with, they need less hands on?

Elisabeth: Yes.

Catherine: And the more they interfere, the more hands on they need.

Elisabeth: Yes, absolutely.

Catherine: So you see hands as the primary way of helping...

Elisabeth: Of helping them to stop.

Peggy: Yes, because what you're trying to teach, even without using words, is how to inhibit. And you can, through your hands, in giving a good experience, teach a person how to be still, and how not to jump when they think they're going to be taken out of the chair.

Marjory: I think it's possible to learn all the principles of the Technique without hands on experience. Whether one would be able to apply them at all is another matter. But without application, it's just information.

Walter: Yes, if by "learn" you mean "apply", then none. I think hands on experience is absolutely indispensable. Certainly people can get intellectual knowledge of the Technique but they can get intellectual knowledge of anything else. But when it comes to an actual putting it into practice, I don't believe, well, theoretically you can say, Alexander did it himself and he used to say that what he could do anybody else could do, but realistically for the majority of people, hands on experience is indispensable.

Buzz: Well, I'd like to say, and this goes back to your question about the future of the Technique, that just as Alexander did his first teaching, and apparently got results without using his hands, I think we're going to phase out the use of hands. Maybe not in my lifetime, but in yours. And I think if we really found out what happens when growth takes place in people trying to learn how to be more free, I would bet more than a plugged nickel that hands would not be involved in accomplishing that. So why can't we at least introduce non-manual pedagogy as an important part, to be taken very seriously and studied and scientifically analysed in comparison with the manual teaching and just see what happens?

Catherine: Do any of you see any threats to the Technique in the future?

Erika: There are plenty right now.

Catherine: What are they?

Erika: The Alexander Technique. Bang, bang! This is the Alexander Technique! People are all busy trying to do the Technique instead of learning what to do with themselves, and stopping. You shouldn't even notice it.

Buzz: The Alexander world, that's the greatest threat to the Alexander Technique, that and the human propensity to not want to change.

Peggy: Bad teachers are the only threat I see. And we always have those anyway.

Marjory: I think we have two opportunities that are noticeably under-used, and more and more under-exploited as time goes on, I fear, and those are the opportunity to inhibit habitual reactions and direct conscious ones. Our unwillingness to exploit these two opportunities is a continuous threat to the Technique as a professional practice.

Walter: I don't see any serious threats to the Technique. I mean obviously there are threats from bureaucracy, from people who don't know anything about it, but that's inevitable. But not a threat in comparison to the threat of the libel action. That was a threat. If Alexander had lost that, that would have really finished it.ⁱⁱ

Catherine: If you had one idea or thought you hoped teachers, pupils and students of the Technique would use in the next century, what would it be?

Walter: To see the Technique as "Self-Help" with regard to the proper use of our postural mechanisms and hence to the use of the self as a whole.

Elisabeth: To stop trying to be right and put much attention and thought on stopping being wrong.

Marjory: To inhibit, direct and be happy.

Peggy: To have warmth, kindness and enthusiasm for the work.

Erika: To learn to stop.

Buzz: The one that preoccupies me a great deal is Alexander's insistence on the importance of change. He got the tremendous discovery he made through complete initiative and independence, and going beyond everything everybody knew. And I think the next millennium is going to be a time of change such as the world has never seen—the development of new technologies, new ideas, new politics probably—and the most important thing we can do is be open to change. Change and development of the application of his ideas, and to let the Technique grow.

ⁱMarjory Barlow's comments are excerpted from *An Examined Life*, a book about her life and work by Trevor Allan Davies, published by Mornum Time Press, in 2001.

ⁱⁱ In 1945 Alexander brought an action for libel against the editors of *Volkskrachte*, a journal published by the South African government, for an article written by Dr. Ernst Jokl, who criticized Alexander, his Technique and Alexander's followers. The Court found for the plaintiff.