




direction

a journal on the Alexander Technique
volume3 number4

paradigms of self



Where is the self, what is the self,
how do we know self, can we
change self and will we ever truly
understand...? More inside >>



direction

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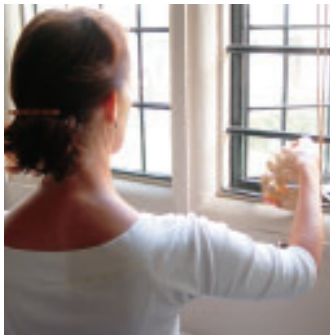


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Editorials

Editorial ■ Paul Cook



It gives me great pleasure to present our latest labour of love at DIRECTION. When I look at the calibre and credentials of our writers this issue I am thankful for their generosity and patience in helping this topic come alive. From six countries our material is gathered and it has been truly an honour working with such eminent Alexander teachers worldwide.

Cathy has gathered together a talented group of professionals to explore this extremely difficult area of human understanding. Thanks to a Tasmanian performer the task has been fast-tracked somewhat, but we are still only at the beginning of the beginning.

I've heard it said many times, "We don't see the world as it is, we see it as we are." Little more confirmation of this truth is needed than a look at the many variations of Alexander's technique that can be found. From all areas of the spectrum we can learn and I am constantly amazed at the incredible "knowing" that some Alexander teachers exhibit despite our training and the subjectivity of our humanly experience. Absolutely no-one is exempt and "knowing" only makes more obvious our reliance on habit. We know well the famous quote from Walt Kelly's Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us!"

We throw the word "self" into many conversations every day assuming that our self is the same collection of understandings as other selves. And yet, surely this is where humanity has gone wrong along the path of civilisation? Assumptions!

Each issue produced at DIRECTION is like the end of an era for me. You cannot help but become immersed in the information on a personal basis. The perk of this job is that I not only read this material, but I get to fraternise with the writers through the editing process. Of course we also include contact details at the end of every article for readers to follow on too and I encourage you to do so.

I welcome back Mervyn Waldman to this issue with his final edition to An Alexander Lesson. I also welcome back "Walter Remembers" with Conrad Brown as our new editor. I hope you enjoy this issue as much as I have putting it into print. ■

Issue Editorial ■ Cathy Madden



Assumptions! What I hope to do as a teacher of the Alexander Technique is to leave my assumptions at the door to my studio, and to walk into the unknown as I teach my student or students. And yet, there are many unanticipated surprises – when I find out that I have an assumption that I didn't know I had.

The focus of this issue of DIRECTION began with a discovery of one of those surprise assumptions. Over the course of a number of years of investigation, I had realised that the younger students I was teaching at the University thought of "self" very differently from how I was thinking of "self". It was a reminder to me that the notion of "self" is fluid. Since the focus of our work in the Alexander world is "use of the self", I felt that a group of articles meditating on how our conception of self develops and transforms as we use this Technique would be valuable – thought-provoking.

The authors we have gathered, approach this topic from many sides of its prism – from a self changed by using the AT in new experiences, to consciously using the AT to change an old view of the self, to the self of our students, to the self as teacher, to the science of self and the philosophy of self. From many sides of the prism emerge more potential questions to our "selves", more ways in which we can consider leaving assumptions behind. With fewer assumptions, or what Alexander called "fixed beliefs," more potential opens for us individually and collectively.

Alexander teacher and poet,
Carol Levin, playfully
articulates the movement
of self with selves:

The Tao of World Peace

If the *y* is removed
your becomes *our*.
Take our in
Your
And *you* remains.
I is implied
Because without *I*
There is no
your, you, or our.

Consider the pesky
I in relation to *we*.
When is *we*
more important
than *I*? Must we
subordinate *I*
for the good
of our *we*—?

In other words:
expunge *I*
to prime a *we*?

can we change our minds?
If *we* innovate each *I*
might it animate *us*?
Now I ask you,
what about *They*? ■

Refurbishing Image-making in Actors and Others

■ By Cathy Madden “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” – Albert Einstein

For several years, a mystery had been presenting itself to me in my work with actors at the University Of Washington School Of Drama. I am going to walk you through the “story” of this work, the questions that presented themselves to me, and the theory I have developed and continue to test. The threads of the story include Alexander Technique, acting, child development and brain research. What I discovered has changed the way I approach teaching anyone—not only because of the new information I had, but also because the whole process was a reminder that what I define as “self” may not be what someone else may define as “self”.

The Mystery

The coordination mystery presented itself to me when the curriculum of the Professional Actor Training Program changed. One Director retired, and the new Director brought a new acting/movement study into the program – Suzuki Training. (Some of you may be familiar with Suzuki Music Training; the theatre training is completely different.) Suzuki Theatre Training is characterised by the actors’ use of images as they perform a wide variety of physically demanding tasks.

In theatre work, an image is any person, place, thing, or event that is affecting you on stage, but is not actually physically present. An example would be when a scene in a play is supposed to be outdoors on a cold winter day. The actors use specific images—wind on their faces, fingers numb from cold, and perhaps snow on the ground—to cause them to behave as if they are cold. The ability to create and use these images is generally called imagination. Joseph Chilton Pearce, whose work is important in this discussion, defines imagination “as the ability to create images not present to the sensory system.”¹

At the University of Washington, I co-teach in many classes, providing Alexander information as the students are learning other skills. When the Suzuki Training was introduced, Steve Pearson specifically wanted to incorporate the Alexander Technique into the Suzuki Training because the form has often been associated with excessive tension. My first encounter watching the Suzuki form was disturbing—I didn’t like how the students were using themselves to do the work. Yet, as I looked at the movement forms themselves, there was nothing inherently wrong with the forms themselves. There was clearly, however, something to be gained by bringing the Alexander Technique’s perspective on coordination into the teaching/learning of Suzuki.

My colleagues at the University of Washington (Professors Robyn Hunt and Steve Pearson) were very open to new ideas. Within a couple of years of working together, the language of instruction changed. (A detailed discussion of this process is available in Theatre Topics²). Non-anatomical instructions had changed to more anatomy-friendly language. Students weren’t asked to have strength

they didn’t have yet, but were given means to develop the strength. In slow motion work, the actors were no longer trying not to blink. (Note—no one ever told them not to blink, but some of them were taking the slow motion instruction so literally that they chose not to blink because they couldn’t do it in slow motion.) We transformed the value of working “hard” to working “well.” People who saw the University of Washington version of Suzuki Training could see that our work was more free, more coordinated.

But something still wasn’t quite working as far as I was concerned. I taught these students in other classes, and I could see that some of them became visibly less coordinated in the Suzuki class. What was it?

First Clue

A new clue appeared. I was coaching one of the actresses who “dis-coordinated” in Suzuki. She was doing a monologue, and before she started the piece, she was moving well. But as soon as she started I saw her do what I also saw her do in the Suzuki work. I asked myself, “What is the common denominator here?” One possible common denominator was the use of images. The monologue this actress was doing was one in which she was talking to someone who wasn’t actually there. I started asking questions:

“Susan, what are you thinking as you start?”



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"I'm trying to see the person I'm talking to."

"Are you actually trying to see him?"

"Yes."

"There is no one there."

Susan looked puzzled. I went on to explain that an image is imaginary. You decide that the person is there and respond as if it is true. Susan did the piece again without "trying" to hallucinate and her coordination was better.

This insight about images with Susan was important because it got me to consider image-making in relationship to coordination. I did miss something important in this work with Susan; and discovered it later.

My next set of experiments had to do with clarifying the use of images for the whole group. It was illuminating for me to hear how many of the students were either trying to really see things that weren't there, or were embarrassed because they never actually saw images. As we developed new Alexander-informed acting plans, the quality of the work improved, but something was still wrong. I began to wonder if some of the problem resulted from the Suzuki instruction that asked the students to look at images straight ahead of them in the far distance. Were they creating a kind of tunnel of vision, possibly causing a "squished" environment, a sense of self that was narrow and front-oriented?

Once again, I communicated my question to Robyn Hunt with whom I was co-teaching the class. We started changing the language of instruction—reminding the students that even though they were looking ahead in the far distance, that image was part of a larger environment that included near and middle distance vision as well. We also reminded them that images involved all of the senses. The overall quality of the work continued to improve, but some unusual and "squished" physical patterns persisted.

More Clues

Several new threads of information come into the story here. I took the actors outdoors so that they could have the experiment of doing the Suzuki form with real objects in the distance (The Cascade Mountain Range) and a real, all-around environment—no image-making/imagination required. The funny physical patterns disappeared.

The other information came through the teachers at the school my daughters attended—The Seattle Waldorf School. The teachers at the school had a strong wish that the students watch little or no TV. They explained that when young children watch television, play videogames, or use computers they are short-circuiting the development of the image-making capacity in the brain.

The problem with television is that children get used to not using their imaginative thinking at all, and they don't exercise that part of the brain that creates images...Creating pictures is not just entertaining, but the foundation of our higher thoughts...³

One of the teachers had an experiment with the parents. He showed us a television cartoon that depicted Roman mythological heroes. Then he told us a story that used the same characters. He asked us, what did you see as I told you the story? The parents all "saw" the cartoon figures in our heads rather than a heroic figure. In addition, television watching takes time from other children's activities – moving, handling objects, playing. According to Jean Piaget, a respected researcher in child development, "Development moves from the concrete to the abstract."

What I now knew was that:

The actors had much better coordination when they used real rather than imaginary objects.

AND

Image-making is an ability that can be disrupted developmentally.

I began to ask them some new questions. What I found out amazed me. The following is what happened with one actress.

As I watched her work, I saw that she was in one of the strange, compact, less-than-optimally coordinated shapes. She was looking into the far distance. I asked her what she was seeing.

“A tree.”

“Can you describe it to me?”

“It’s about this high.” (She held her hands in the shape of a small television screen or computers.)

Suddenly, I understood more about what was probably happening to Susan in her monologue that I mentioned earlier. This is the piece that I missed. The image she had been using in her monologue looked small to me but I didn’t understand its significance.

Over and over again, I found that the students who had difficulty maintaining their coordination in activities involving the imagination, described their images as two dimensional and small. Some of them even seemed to think of themselves two-dimensionally. I began to ask, as casually as possible, about TV, videogames, and computers. There did seem to be a correlation between coordination and the amount of electronic input the student had had, particularly at an early age.

Child development researchers have been questioning the appropriateness of television for young children for a long time.^{4,5,6,7} Most of their focus has been on the thinking process, but they do note changes in movement patterns. Susan Johnson, again, in describing her own child, says that “after watching TV, his play was erratic, his movements impulsive and uncoordinated.”⁸ I began to wonder if what I was seeing in the acting students were the results of the changes that mind/brain/child development researchers were concerned about.

I got some confirmation of that as I continued to read and realised that one of the concerns of these researches was that students were unable to connect images.^{9,10,11} I realised how often actors would come to me with an acting issue they couldn’t solve because they couldn’t string images together. For example, an actor would come in and say

I think the character _____.

The script says _____ about the character.

The director says _____.

The actor could describe each of these things separately. I could see that the ideas could easily be strung together, but the actor couldn’t do it. If I strung them together for them, they could use the new idea but they couldn’t formulate it. While it is true that I have more experience in acting coaching than they do, the lack of ability to string things together showed up more and more each year. I also heard other faculty members wondering what was happening with our students in this area.

With our questions and observations in mind, my colleagues and I continued experimenting with ways to teach three-dimensional coordination. In the Suzuki-based class (one that we simply call Training) alterations have been made to existing exercises and new exercises have developed. In one exercise, the change was simply to ask the students to literally watch their limbs as they move them; in this way, they see the dimensionality as they move. Other changes have been as simple as having students stand at many angles to each other rather than in straight lines so that the dimensionality of the playing space is emphasised. Robyn Hunt, with whom I co-teach, has also invented more exercises that involve spiral movements that also emphasise dimension. Essentially, anywhere that we can, we are including/acknowledging the dimensionality of our world.

Larger Implications

My work with the theatre students allowed me to discover this phenomenon. I was able to observe them and ask questions over a period of years. What they revealed to me has helped me to understand some of my other students. I had encountered, and increasingly encounter, people who seem to diminish their physical selves themselves when they think of their coordination. It led me



to looking more at current child development theories and research as well as the developing science of how our psychophysical self creates and recreates itself. I read articles about people teaching the sciences who were disturbed by their students' abilities to spit out facts and figures but be unable to manipulate that information creatively. They also attribute this to early childhood exposure to electronic media. I also have a deeper understanding of Marshall McLuhan's work, "The Medium is the Massage."¹²

For me, it has been another reminder that what I conceive of as self may be radically different from what my students conceive of as self. I know that when I say whole body or whole self to a student, I don't know what size or dimension that whole body/whole self is to them. I don't take it for granted that they think of a three-dimensional arm. If their "fixed belief" about themselves does not include dimension, I may need to discuss it with them. My concern with the actors began with a limitation on both their imaginations and their physical expressions of that imagination. When I work with non-performers, I am finding that sometimes the cause of their physical aches and pains may be traceable to thinking of themselves nondimensionally. It isn't the only possibility, but it is one that I now include in my analysis of "the conditions of use present" in my student. I also wholeheartedly join the number of people questioning the suitability of electronic media for young children.

I am including now an extended quote from Joseph Chilton Pearce's work, *Evolution's End*. It is provocative, and I hope raises more questions for each of us as possessors of psychophysical selves.

"Television floods the infant-child brain with images at the very time his or her brain is supposed to learn to make images from within...

Storytelling feeds into the infant-child as stimulus that brings about the response of image making that involves every aspect of our triune system (brain).

Television feeds both stimulus and response into that infant-child brain and therein lies the danger. Television floods the brain with a counterfeit of the response that the brain is supposed to learn to make to the stimuli of words or music.

As a result, much structural coupling between mind and environment is eliminated; few metaphoric images develop; few higher cortical areas of the brain develop...

Failing to develop imagery means having no imagination. This is far more serious than not being able to daydream. It means children who can't "see" what the mathematical symbol or the semantic words mean; nor the chemical formulae; nor the concept of civilisation as we know it... They can sense only what is immediately bombarding their physical system and are restless and ill-at-ease without such bombardment.

Being sensory deprived, they initiate stimulus through constant movement or intensely verbal interaction with each other...¹³

It has been our experience with the actors that it is possible to "rehabilitate" at least some of this lost ability by using the Alexander Technique in combination with acting exercises that ask for dimension. It can't be the same ability because how the brain functions in childhood learning is different from adult learning. It is still early days in the experiment, but I have witnessed changes in how actors are able to use images as we psychophysically address their use of imagination. In my general teaching practice, relearning dimension has helped people move more efficiently in their lives. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Pearce *Evolution's End: Claiming the Potential of Our Intelligence* Harper: San Francisco (1992) p. 62.
- 2 Madden. *The Language of Teaching Coordination: Suzuki Training Meets the Alexander Technique*. Theatre Topics 12.1 (2001) 49-61.
- 3 Johnson *Strangers in our home: TV and our children's minds* The Peridot Journal vol. 11 no. (Fall 1999) p. 20.
- 4 Healy *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It* Touchstone: New York (1990).
- 5 Healy *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds – and What We Can Do About It* Touchstone: New York (1998).
- 6 Johnson op. cit.
- 7 Pearce op.cit.
- 8 Johnson op. cit. p. 8.
- 9 Healy op.cit.
- 10 ibid.
- 11 Pearce op.cit.
- 12 McLuhan *The Medium is the Massage* Gingko Press: California (2004).
- 13 Pearce op.cit. pp. 164-167.

About the Writer



Catherine Madden is Associate Professor for the University of Washington School of Drama, and does workshops and classes at her private studio. She has been a guest at teacher training schools and has done teacher refresher courses in Japan, England, Germany, England and Switzerland. She was a Congress Teacher at the International Congress held in Sydney in 1994 and featured speaker at the 1999 International Congress in Freiburg, Germany. Cathy studied with Marjory Barstow for over 15 years and served as her assistant in workshops for over 10 years. She is the current Chair of Alexander Technique International (ATI).

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