

AN OVERVIEW OF ALEXANDER POLITICS

By Ron Dennis

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Every movement, whether outwardly concerned with governance or not, acquires a political and worldly dimension. As Mahatma Gandhi once wryly remarked (at least in the film), "It takes a lot of money to keep me in poverty." Having devoted this issue's lead article to the 3rd Congress, with its inevitable political overtones, it seems appropriate to keep these matters in perspective through a fuller discussion.

Ultimately, they are related to both historical and contemporary concerns about the training, qualification, and certification of Alexander teachers.

Frederick Matthias Alexander began teaching in London in 1904, after having developed the Technique on his own in Australia during the previous 15 years. Early on, F. M. (as he is commonly referred to in Alexander circles) brought his brother A. R. (Albert Redden) Alexander into partnership, and for many years the two brothers were the only sources for instruction. Before 1930, however, F. M. had also qualified at least two early students and associates, Irene Tasker (who, incidentally, was a pioneer of Montessori education in England) and Ethel Webb, his longtime personal secretary.

It was not until 1930 that Alexander opened the first formal training course, when he felt some confidence — after 40 years of experience — that the necessary skills could be learned in such a setting and that there would be a demand for trained teachers. The duration of the London course was set at three years, with a total time investment, considering the days and hours of classes, of about 1600 hours. This was the basic, and indeed, virtually the only arrangement for becoming certified until Alexander's death in 1955,

although a few teachers were certified in America during the war years, when Alexander and his school for children found sanctuary in Stowe, MA, at a facility provided by the American Unitarian Association.

The issue of a democratically-organized professional society to protect and propagate the Technique had come up in F.M.'s lifetime, but he had vetoed it on the basis that he personally could be overruled by a majority. Appearances perhaps to the contrary, Alexander's decision in this case seems not entirely self-serving, as possibly only the individual who has uniquely created something of value can fully appreciate. But in any case, within a few years of Alexander's death, and for the above-mentioned purposes, the certified teachers in London had organized the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT).

The main motivation behind the founding of STAT (Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, London) was defining and maintaining standards, now that the founder was gone, for the training and certification of new teachers of the Alexander Technique. Witnesses relate that controversy ran high, as is often the case in successional situations, and that in the end, aside from establishing the administrative machinery of the new society, all that could be agreed upon was that trainings must consist of at least 1600 training hours over three years. Teachers approved to conduct programs under these standards submitted their graduates to STAT, which duly conferred membership and a credential, the STAT certificate. From its inception in the late 50's until the mid-80's, STAT considered itself the sole source of an Alexander teacher's legitimacy, short of

recognition by F.M. Alexander himself.

In the U. S., meanwhile, teaching had been going on since the mid-30's. Two graduates of Alexander's first training class, which had finished in 1934, were Americans who returned here to work, Marjorie Barstow in Boston (with A. R. Alexander) and Lincoln, her home, and Lulie Westfeldt in New York. Westfeldt was joined later in the 30's by Alma Frank, a New Yorker returning from London where she had gone to train with Alexander. Before 1950, however, virtually the only other active American teacher was Frank Pierce Jones of Cambridge, who had been trained by Alexander during the latter's war-time sojourn in Stowe, Massachusetts.

We can now note that by 1960, with the Technique having experienced a quarter-century of steady if gradual growth on these shores, a clear need had emerged for American teacher training. But none of the recognized teachers here who could have done so took the crucial step of establishing a training program — a fact, as we shall see, of far-ranging significance. Into this situation came two women, Judith Leibowitz and Deborah Caplan of New York, determined that the Alexander Technique would have an American institutional home. Neither was certified by STAT. Judith had worked extensively with Lulie Westfeldt and Alma Frank, and had established her own teaching practice during the 50's. Deborah, a registered physical therapist, had been trained in the Technique by her mother, Alma Frank. Together with three students Judith had trained, they incorporated the American Center for the Alexander Technique in New York in 1964, and three years later com-

menced the first training class. ACAT has continuously trained teachers since that time, and Judith Leibowitz (d. 1990) lived to see a dream realized: in 1988, its Teacher Certification Program was accredited as a graduate-level program in higher education and also gained federal recognition for student financial aid and foreign student enrollment. Deborah Caplan still serves on the Senior Training Faculty there.

We have seen to this point how the main avenues of Alexander teacher certification after F.M.'s death in 1955 became those deriving from STAT (Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, London) and ACAT (American Center for the Alexander Technique, New York). A third line, that of individual Alexander teachers whose training activities have been implied or explicit in varying degrees, remains to be discussed. These situations have been relatively few, both in England and abroad; we allude here to three of the most visible examples on the American scene.

Without doubt, the most influential teacher in this category has been Marjorie Barstow. A graduate of Alexander's first training class, Marjorie, now past 90, returned to the U.S. in the mid-1930's and has remained in her family home in Lincoln, Nebraska since about 1940. In the 1960's she began offering extended summer and winter workshops in Lincoln. These workshops afforded virtually the only means for people not having a teacher in their area to get substantial work in the Technique. Marjorie, an acknowledged master, did not consider herself to be a trainer, but the fact is that over the years, quite a few people who worked with her eventually set themselves up as teachers, with more-or-less tacit approval. In the late 1980's Marjorie recognized 26 of these by name, in a letter responding to the question of who could be eligible for membership in the newly-forming

national professional organization NASTAT (North American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique). Currently, the Performance School in Seattle, a joint effort of several individuals, and the Alexander School in Philadelphia, headed by Bruce Fertman, represent the main concentrations of Barstow-recognized teachers in this country.

Marjorie's contemporary, Catherine Wielopolska of Philadelphia, enrolled in the first training course but was not able to finish the last year and be certified. In the late 1960's, Kitty (as she is known) returned to England and finished her training with Patrick Macdonald. She started her own training course in 1976, which, although basically a traditional three-year program, was not approved by STAT, for reasons unclear to the present writer. Kitty certified a relatively small number of teachers, probably less than 25, before her death at 88 in 1988.

A third teacher deserving mention in this group is Aileen Crow of New York. Originally certified by ACAT and a faculty member there during the 70's, Aileen left to establish her own training course in 1978. This program has been controversial in the eyes of mainstream Alexander teachers because of its relatively short duration (approximately two years, based on monthly intensives plus more extended work at various times) compared to the traditional trainings. Aileen has probably certified about 20 teachers.

By the early 1980's, relations between AC' and STAT — never officially established — had become unofficially yet definitely strained. ACM' graduates accounted for most of the practicing teachers in this country, yet were considered more or less "illegitimate" because of ACAT's founding by non-STAT-recognized teachers. Confounding the situation were rumors, not entirely without basis, of certain

influences of non-traditional nature among some American teachers (mostly meditational or psychotherapeutic in origin). Yet certain STAT members continued to travel regularly to teach in the States, often using the facilities and membership of ACM' in New York and S.F. as their base of operation. It is understandable that in a few instances these visiting teachers came somewhat in the manner of apostles to the heathen, which of course did not help things either. In a fitting quirk of history, it was to be a Canadian who eventually brought about a conciliation.

David Gorman of Ontario had trained as an Alexander teacher in London, and, by dint of his gifts as illustrator and anatomist, was in demand in the U.S. in the early 80's for his lectures on "The Body Moveable." As he encountered American-trained teachers at firsthand, he found that they were in general as capable as their STAT-certified counterparts. He also found the U. S. Alexander scene crying for unification, having become, if not as chaotic as some abroad imagined, at least unhealthily fragmented, despite an almost 50-year history. To his great credit, it was largely Gorman's inspiration of a means to such unity and his labors as trusted broker on both sides of the Atlantic that moved STAT eventually to give its blessing to the project.

The plan as it evolved called for an American society of teachers incorporating training & certification standards acceptable to STAT, in effect a political alliance between STAT and ACAT. After much hard work (to put it mildly) by Gorman and a steering committee of American teachers, North American STAT (NASTAT) was finally incorporated in New York in 1987. This longed-for union of the mainstream English and American Alexander movements, almost matrimonial in its import, was truly a very great achievement, and as

astounding to many of us on the inside as, say, recent events in the ex-Soviet Union, mutatis mutandis! Nor was this all. It had also been anticipated that the step of both organizations' making constitutional provision to allow reciprocal recognition of their respective societies would yield at a stroke a mechanism for an eventual network of allied societies worldwide, thus creating for the first time an international standard and forum for the profession.

This standard largely deals with the individual's training and qualifications to enter professional practice as a Teacher of the Alexander Technique. Although differing from society to society in details, the standard essentially requires completion of 1600 hours of training in no less than three years on an approved course. The intending director of a training course must be approved by the society, and the course itself must be at least 80% practical hands-on work, subject to monitoring and review, with a faculty-student ratio of no less than one to five. National societies now exist in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Israel, France, Switzerland, South Africa; The Netherlands and Germany, in addition to Great Britain and the U.S., with the steps toward full reciprocal recognition almost accomplished.

On the American scene, these overwhelmingly favorable developments came not without cost. At the outset, only STAT and ACAT-certified teachers were eligible for membership in the new national organization. It was felt by both American and English sponsors of NASTAT that, while ACAT had established a successful track record by maintaining organized training courses for twenty years, not enough was known of the qualifications of individuals trained or recognized by independent teachers to permit "grandfathering" them. Thus,

even though due provision was made for such individuals eventually to become full teaching members of the society, through evaluation and/or additional training, the fact is that the establishment of NASTAT left unachieved the full unification of the American Alexander profession.

The reaction of non-NASTAT teachers to this scenario has been mixed. Several have successfully negotiated the waiver process and joined, or are in the process of doing so. Others have not, and perhaps will not. An organization called Alexander Technique International, numbering probably in the neighborhood of 50, has been formed to represent the interests of these and like-minded individuals. A special concern is the perpetuation of disunion through the continued operation of training programs by independent teachers. No one, in NASTAT or out, challenges a salutary degree of diversity, or the good intentions of all those serving the Alexander calling as teachers. But for such a tiny profession, in this era of increasing litigation and regulation, particularly in the health and alternative-health arenas, getting all Alexander teachers to pull together in terms of public perception and policy must be seen as a very high priority.

For its part, NASTAT has served the profession admirably during its first five years of existence. Its membership has grown from 134 charter members to 280 today, comprising a large majority of American teachers, with an additional 135 enrolled student members. It publishes a directory of certified teachers, approved training courses, and affiliated national societies, together with a reading list. It fulfills public requests for information from the national office in Champaign, Illinois. It conducts annual meetings that offer continuing education. It has adopted a Code of Ethics and guidelines for approval and review of training courses. It sponsors

conferences of Directors of Training, itself an historic step within the Technique. It participated crucially in the establishment of an international standard of teacher education and qualification. Clearly representing the high road of professionalism, certification by NASTAT or one of its national affiliates is the basic professional credential that all Alexander teachers should have. For these reasons, for the public good as well as the private interest of all teachers of Alexander's great discoveries, it is to be hoped that the vision of NASTAT to unite the profession in this country can eventually be realized.