



**The Inaugural  
F. M. Alexander Memorial Lecture**

*The Alchemist's  
Apprentices*

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## The Alchemists papers (abstract)

Over 100yrs ago a little known Alchemist succeeded in creating one of the most fundamental transformations desired by mankind; turning gravity into light. The Alchemist spent many years in study before achieving this process and in the course of his studies he passed on his knowledge to a few chosen apprentices. These apprentices in their turn relayed the secret on to another generation and so the process lived on. His discoveries became known worldwide and many people studied to be able to do what he did. These papers, which consist of manuscripts and extracts from records of the Alchemists apprentices, recently came to light in a little known library in Brighton. They reveal aspects of the secret processes of the Alchemist and how any diligent apprentice can study and succeed in performing the Alchemist greatest magic, transforming Gravity into Light.

### **Manuscript 1. From the papers of CN, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Alchemist.**

*Gravity and Light*, are two opposing but complementary forces that stimulate the human postural mechanisms. We must contend with gravity as a downward force in our lives, holding us on to the planet, and yet we have an inbuilt urge to extend upwards. This urge is both physical and for many symbolic of an inner search for understanding, enlightenment and illumination. To grow towards the light is a fundamental urge for most life forms,

Grappling with these two forces is a rewarding journey that can lead in many directions (mostly upwards!). This piece is the culmination of a twenty-year journey that the alchemist both wittingly and unwittingly undertook. It explores a crystallisation of understanding, experience and practice that extends both into the past and the future.

### **Manuscript 2. From an unknown apprentice.**

#### ***The Mirrored Chamber***

The Alchemist was voiceless. Like many travellers in strange lands he did not know where he was bound, he only knew he could not stay where he was. He had many

woes, his voice was repeatedly cracked and hoarse, his neck stiff and his digestion poor. Once, people had flocked to hear him speak, but now even his friends told him they could hear the harshness of his indrawn breath, a gasping sound that fell roughly on their ears. He had prided himself on his oratory skills and on his breathing and was dismayed at this reversal of fortune that left him almost dumb and without any understanding of how to solve his dilemma. He sought help from doctors, who suggested a rest cure, which went against his restless nature. But he accepted this advise, accepted too an invitation to speak once more to a crowd of listeners whom he hoped to impress, for even an alchemist must eat and crowds bring individuals seeking knowledge of the craft and money to learn it.

On the night of his great narration, the Alchemist was buoyant, his voice and vocal mechanisms was well rested, he was once more in command of his faculties and began his declamations confidently and in fine voice. On the edge of his hearing he discerned the appreciative mutters of his audience, this little admiring comments they made about his performance. But it was not to last, not half way though he felt his throat close and the first signs of soreness at the back of his mouth. He drew on all his forces of determination and effort and tried harder to keep his voice strong. But the admiring mutters turned to concern and whispers of discontent and finally, voiceless once more he retired from the stage and retreated from the world into a chamber of mirrors. The Alchemist became a mysterious figure, who spent many years closeted in his chamber gazing at his own reflection in mirrors. Mirrors were all around, revealing secrets that he alone could understand<sup>1</sup>.

The Alchemist wove a great spell of magic, blending the forces of gravity and the forces of light. He blended body, mind and breath into a potent elixir that he applied to his own voice. To his great astonishment and delight, not only did this elixir free his voice, it improved his digestion and his vitality. Others saw his transformation and sought his help. And so he taught them the spells he had discovered. He helped the lame to walk and the stutterer to speak<sup>2</sup>. He freed the sick from their prison of pain, and helped the breathless to breathe<sup>3</sup>. He enlivened the minds of the dull and caused the philosopher to think yet more deeply<sup>4</sup>. He was a strange and powerful man, now partly wrapped in the mystery of the past; his innermost secrets known only to a few. His hands brought about the transformations he made, and I, his apprentice, wondered if I too could perform his most powerful spell; transforming

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to F.M.'s study of his use pattern using mirrors set at different angles enabling him to see what he was doing. See *Evolution of a Technique* in F.M.'s Use of The Self.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to F.M.'s chapter on the stutterer in Use of the Self.

<sup>3</sup> F.M. was known as "The Breathing Man.". There are several accounts of him helping people with breathing problems. Articles and Lectures has several papers of interest on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> I refer to a comment overheard by one of F.M.s teachers and documented in a collection of aphorisms. 'I don't care what man you bring up, Socrates or anyone else: you will find gaps and holes in his thinking. Let me co-ordinate him and you will not find gaps and holes in his thinking'



gravity into light. I begged him not only to teach me for myself, but to show me how to teach others and this, the Alchemist did.

### **Manuscript 3. From the papers of CN, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Alchemist.**

The Alchemist died in 1955, when I was three years old. I would never have known of his work if it had not been for my mother, who, suffering cruelly from a severe arthritic condition of the spine, had sought help from a teacher who had studied with one of the Alchemist apprentices, a certain W.H.M. At my mothers insistence I went for 30 lessons in a period of little over 3 months. I was 22 years old. I became intrigued by the Alchemist and desired above all to study his work. I knew that the Alchemist had written four scrolls, in which he committed his secret studies to parchment. I had managed to get copies of the scrolls and had tried to read them. But I was frustrated. The meaning of his words evaded me. I tried to do what he had done, to carry out the same experiments that he had carried out. I had to find out more.

I went to the house of W.H.M, and desperately wanted to explore it. I had many questions and hoped the people inside the house would enlighten me. What were the Alchemist's secrets? How did he transform gravity into light and could I do it too?

Inside the house I found a spiral staircase. At the bottom sat a young man and as I passed him he advised me to 'free my neck and let my head go forward and up'. It was, he said "The order of things." As I had already had 30 lessons, I ignored him, as I already knew that. I climbed up to the first turn of the stairs and there, sitting on a step was a woman. She smiled at me and beckoned me over to her. She pulled a chair out from a dark corner and bade me stand in front of it. She placed her hands around the base of my neck and said, "Free your neck, so that your head can go forward and up and your back can lengthen and widen." I tried to smile back, but I was confused and angry, after all I knew that. So I ignored her and climbed the stairs some more, craning my neck to look up towards the top-surely someone would help me?

Further up I met W.H.M, who was an old man, his face beaming like a schoolboys', wreathed in smiles. He seemed delighted to see me and at once put his hands on my neck, my chest, my back, whilst telling me stories of the Alchemist and the people he taught. Some of them, he said, didn't listen very well and once the Alchemist had thrown a book at a man who was pulling his head back as he left the Alchemists' presence. He had just spent 30 minutes learning not to pull his head back but he thought he knew better than the Alchemist. The Alchemist kept insisting that the man was pulling his head back but the man didn't feel that he was, indeed he believed strongly that he wasn't and in his belief, he also believed he was right. The Alchemist told him feelings were not to be relied on, but the man ignored him. When the Alchemist threw the book at the man, it hit him on the head. "There," cried the Alchemist, "You certainly felt that! Don't come back to me until you can admit you

were wrong!" W.H.M laughed as he told me this story and I laughed too, I would never be so foolish as to ignore such good advise. As I left W.H.M, I looked back down the stairs and saw young man beginning to climb at the bottom; he was pulling his head back. "Free your neck," I cried down at him "It is the order of things." He ignored me.

#### **Manuscripts 4. From a scholar apprentice.**

The spiral staircase symbolises the learning pathway. I relate to the idea of going in circles, apparently covering old ground but still getting somewhere, even if there are many moments of disorientation. It's as if partial recognition dawns when tasks are undertaken for the second, third, forth or 100<sup>th</sup> time and in each repetition there are fresh discoveries. This analogy only holds true when the matter in hand is a fascinating and complex one with many subtleties and delights waiting to be uncovered.

As well as being symbolic of the spirals of learning, where one constantly rediscovers knowledge and yet it becomes deeper and more widely used, the spiral staircase represents the spiral nature of the musculature of the human being and the universal existence of spirals in nature and the universe, ranging from the crab nebulae galaxy to the cochlea of the human inner ear or the structure of DNA. Our muscles spiral round our bones and our bones themselves curve and spiral. Water spirals around as it descends rain pipes or down the sink, climbing plants spiral up as they grow seeking light. As learners and teachers we seek knowledge and in doing so we engage in an experiential learning where we discover our own individuality. Sharp (1998) expresses it well when he says, "Individuation is a kind of circular odyssey, a spiral journey, where the aim is to get back to where you started, but knowing where you've been and what for." Bateson (1994) offered a comparative worldview. Mary Bateson is an anthropologist and a keen observer of education and culture and of things unseen as well as seen. The holistic scope of her thinking encompasses the broad experience of humankind and a vibrant approach to education and learning. She identifies a spiral learning process that one initially moves through with only partial understanding, taken in with what she describes as *peripheral vision*. A return later to the same material or experience makes possible clarification that was not initially apparent.

Spiral learning moves through complexity with partial understanding, allowing for later returns. (Bateson, 1994 p.31)

Engaging in the alchemy of gravity and light an individual explores his or her own physical balance over and over again. The interconnectedness of head, neck and back and their role in use are fundamentals that repay much reflection. To become an alchemist oneself, the skill of reflection-in-action is one element in the heady mix of the spell, and one that must be fully embraced.

Looking more closely at other learning methods and their evolution towards reflective practice brings the work of Schön (1987a) into focus. Schön draws on an educational

developmental history that runs back over centuries to Plato, progresses through Tolstoy, and his approach to teaching Russian peasants to read, and Dewey's<sup>5</sup> concepts of thinking in activity, engaging a learners consciousness, and onwards to his observations about reflective practice and its place not just in learning, but in that most tricky of learning situations where would-be teachers are learning how to teach. Apprentice alchemists are not only seeking mastery for themselves but want to master how to show others the same spells.

In learning an artistry, an apprentices' experience is that they must plunge into the experience of it before they fully know or understand what it is they are learning. They often feel that their tutors can't really tell them what they are learning, but in order to learn, the apprentice has to plunge into 'unknowing', a state which may make them feel vulnerable, incompetent, out of control, or that they don't know what they are doing. Schön observes that further down the learning track, students do understand what their tutors are teaching and can engage in dialogue that is meaningful. How does this happen? The process is something like this.

...the master alchemist's' demonstrations and his apprentices' performances are messages which they send to one another. The apprentice's performance, for example, indicating, saying to the master alchemist, "This is what I make of what you have shown me. This thing that I'm doing now is what I make of your spells." And the alchemist, observes that and sees the problems, the difficulties that the apprentice has. At its best this dialogue between Alchemist and apprentice becomes a dialogue of reciprocal reflection-in-action where each of them is reflecting on, and responding to, the message received from the other.

This subtle interweaving of cues and dialogue between Alchemist and apprentice outlines a reflective, learning-by-doing approach which leads to the acquisition of a perceptual skill that is concerned with recognising a response in a person, and this is done largely through the sense of touch.

A person seeking an alchemist's help for a breathing difficulty needs to 'know' the role the neck and head play in breathing. But they may think they need to know directly about breathing and not be interested in the neck and head because they don't 'know' about it. The 'knowing' they need to acquire is a 'knowing' of the body, an experience of difference, a revelation of unrecognised tension patterns. An apprentice learning to teach such a future client has to comprehend many different layers of 'knowing' and what they mean and imply if they are to succeed in offering such a client a new view of their problem.

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<sup>5</sup> John Dewey. Father of American Philosophy and pupil of F.M. Alexander, wrote the introduction to UoS and CCCI

**Manuscript 5. Songs of the apprentice. Unknown source.**

When I was an apprentice alchemist I learned many things in many ways. I learned to power of 'no'. I learned to create a subtle flow of energy in my muscles. I learned how easily I could block my own progress and how much I needed to study patience, which did not come naturally to one of my temperament. Of all the ways I studied and all the methods I explored it is the songs that have stayed with me. Songs of magic, songs of puzzlement, songs of searching and songs to uplift the spirit. Now that I am old, and an alchemist of many years practice I still hear the songs when I cast the spells.

This is the song of the senior alchemists to whom I was apprentice.

**Nothing is Magic, Magic is Nothing**

Before you can do magic  
Magic you must understand  
Before you can do something  
Nothing must be done  
Ask yourself the question  
Which way am I going?  
And if you don't know  
I can show the way

When I was a novice apprentice, I wrote my own song, as we were encouraged to do.  
This is my song.

It seems I am floating but here I am solid,  
my mind tells my muscles the way they might go  
His hands feel so gentle, but I sense their power,  
it seems that inside me I know what to do  
I try, I try, I try to be right  
But I know, I know, my right to be wrong  
I'm here on the staircase, with spirals inside me,  
my mind and my body keep turning around  
His hands lift me up and I feel myself lengthen  
but he doesn't lift me it's hard to know how  
The spell, the spell, I know that's it's gravity  
The spell, the spell, I know that it's light

Sometimes, we apprentices sang together, a chorus celebrating our emerging alchemical expertise.

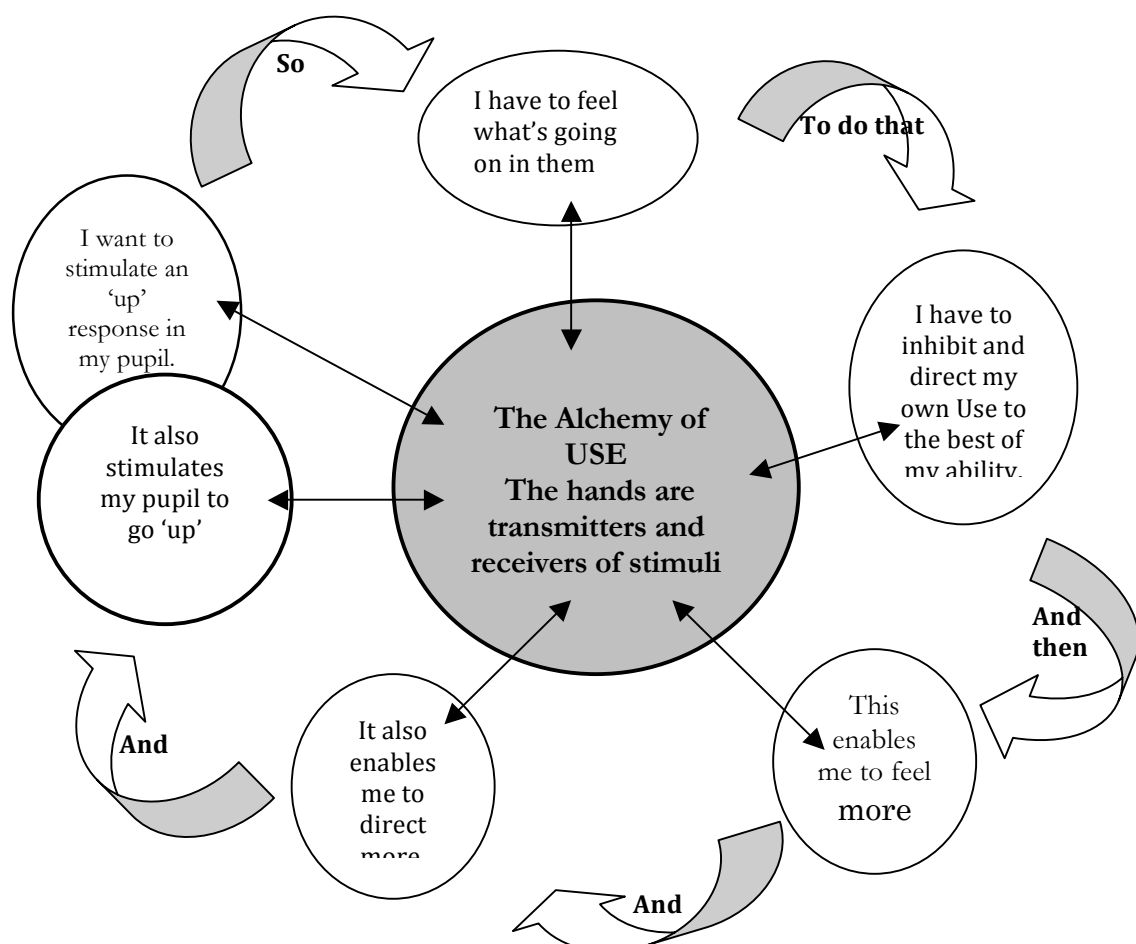
### ♫ Chorus

And so you see \_\_\_ and so you see \_\_\_ What can you do but do nothing?  
There is a way \_\_\_ there is a way \_\_\_ That nothing turns out to be  
something.  
You breathe, you widen, your neck feels so long  
You're tall and moving, no effort at all  
And so you see \_\_\_ and so you see \_\_\_ What can you do but do nothing?  
There is a way \_\_\_ there is a way \_\_\_  
That nothing turns out to be something

These songs and others still ring through my head as I continue up the staircase.

### Manuscript 6. The Great Cycle of Up. From the papers of CN, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Alchemist.

Why, Mr Binkley, when I am teaching you, as I do now, I am able to convey to you what I want to convey, because as I touch you, and guide you with my hands in carrying out my instructions, I, myself, am going up! up! up! (Binkley, 1993 p.51)





## *The alchemy of Gravity & Light*

Each circle represents an elemental ingredient of the great spell that has to be thought about. Central to the ability to being an alchemist is good Use, which will enable the practitioner to use their hands both as transmitters and receivers of information germane to the initiation of the upward stimulus; that which transforms gravity so that it takes us up. The surrounding circles and arrows deal with what has to be done to support good Use. The cycle can be brought into awareness at any point, but it is easiest to start it on the left hands side where two circles overlap. The aim of every Alchemist is to take their pupil 'up' to give them an experience of lengthening in stature. This can only be brought about if the alchemist is paying attention to his or her own Use. To take a pupil 'up' the alchemist needs to know what is happening in the pupil, to feel what is going on, to use their own hands to sense a people's balance. Once again, to do that, the alchemist has to continuously weave his own spell and to look after his or her own Use.

If a practitioner is going to feel what is going on in a pupil, she has to stay means orientated, not end orientated, so she pays attention to her own Use by the tools of inhibition and direction.

This in itself enables the alchemist to feel more, and moving on to the next arrow, it enables them to direct more, to increase the power of the stimulus, to achieve an even better standard of co-ordination in his or her own body (better Use)

It is this power, this spell of direction, this flow of energy in the alchemist that stimulates the pupil to go up, and takes you back to the start point of the cycle of good Use.

What this highlights is that there isn't something 'suddenly different' that has to be done in order to use the hands effectively on someone. An alchemist, no matter how long he or she has been practicing, still has to climb up that staircase of Use.

Manuscript 7. An Alchemist reflects.

***Recitativo accompagnato***

Going back to the great house and watching W.H.M teaching the hands-on-skills to a group of young apprentices was a curious and powerful experience. I was revisiting not only my own training, but also the further training I had done in order to practise the very skill I was now re-examination. I was seeing myself in all these people. In each of their places I recognised something of my own experience. I watched them and I talked to them. I listened to them and it was like wandering up and down the spiral staircase and it came to me that I was in the middle of an opera. Each voice could be heard. From new pupil to advanced Alchemist, each had a part to sing. Sometimes their words were the same, as if they sang in unison, although it was clear that there were soloists whose voices were strong. There was a chorus, which often repeated the words the soloist sang.

Later on in the morning, W.H.M once more wove his spell around me and I experience an extraordinary sense of clarity. In three short well-filled minutes his hands shape me, define me and lift my body and spirit up.

Deeply familiar yet totally fresh, I go up, the way I have since my own first lesson when I was 20, and, at the same time, it is new. I am not the person I was; I am the person that I am. But the threads of Self that connect the 20-year-old single, carefree apprentice to the 57-year-old mother of two young adults and Head Alchemist of my own training are largely woven from my experience of the great spell.

I go from it and I return to it again and again and again. Another twist to the story, another hill to climb, another thought to consider. A living territory, like a landscape I have walked through many times before, that changes subtly and occasionally dramatically every time I revisit it.

W.H.M's hands are strong and yet gentle, they are powerfully subtle. His fingers momentarily lie either side of my breast bone whilst his opposite hand does the same between my shoulder blades. Pressing but not pressing, lifting but not lifting, defining and refining my sense of my own unique structure. A gentle persistent invitation to expand, to go up, to lengthen and to widen. Never dominating, always allowing. I, out of long, well trained conscious habit, inhibit all extraneous thought and movement and allow his hands to stimulate my neuromuscular system.

I am happy.

Nothing else I have encountered has ever given me this experience, or anything remotely approaching it.

W.H.M's back hand is on the lower part of my neck, whilst his front hand is orchestrating my ribs and diaphragm. Effortlessly, my breathing frees and opens up, my neck lengthens out of my shoulders and my back deepens the sense I have of the floor under my feet. I don't need to move, to run around, to stretch, I am doing all those things whilst standing perfectly still. I am simply standing there, going up. It is such a joyful 'all' that I find it hard to communicate its utter simplicity.

Like a **candle** repeatedly dipped in wax, I acquire another layer of understanding. Like an **onion**, another layer of mis-use is peeled away.

I am learning and unlearning at the same time.–

To all of us Alchemists, the great spell of Gravity and Light is still the spell we want to cast. The first Alchemist F.M. Alexander left us hints, writings, thoughts. But for each of us, casting the spell is our personal journey. To those who have had the patience to read these manuscripts I thank you for accompanying me on mine for this time and may your path ever lead you onward and upward.

Alchemist Carolyn Nicholls April 2010

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