

Helena's First Lessons

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There are several diaries of lessons from a pupil's point of view. This is a diary from the teacher's point of view. How do you get the basic concepts across and what do people make of them?

That first phone call

Helena Sommerton rang me today to say that she wanted to have Alexander lessons. She told me that her brother-in-law Adam was having lessons with me and kept telling her how good they were. Hmm, that always gives me pause for thought. What expectations will she have?

"That's nice of Adam," I said. "I'm glad he's enjoying his lessons. Would you like to tell me about why you'd like lessons?"

"Well, Adam said it really made a difference to his work, and how much it helped with his blocks."

Oh dear, my worst fears are confirmed. Adam is an artist, with a capital A. He is funny, talented, temperamental and amazingly tense. He gets so tense that his arms hurt so much he can't do his work. He mostly does lithography, but it's what he calls the creating side of it that he struggles with, the thinking it out. He gets the artists' equivalent of writer's block and mopes around his studio brooding and getting tense whilst exhibition deadlines loom ever closer.

"You see," said Helena, "I'm a sculptor, well perhaps I'm a potter, well, I work in clay and I wondered if you could help me too."

Inwardly I am groaning and I can feel my neck stiffening in anticipation of a difficult customer.

"Adam has had a lot of lessons with me Helena, he's been coming for over two years now. It does take a lot of time before you can apply it to a creative process of any sort, I..."

"Oh, I don't get blocks," she laughed, "Except blocks of clay." More giggles. "I get this terrible back ache when I'm throwing clay, and it used to go away when I went home and had a hot bath, but now it doesn't. And Adam tells me off about the way I wipe my feet on his doormat. He says I am pulling down, whatever that means, and that's why I've got backache."

Relief floods through me, a heavy-footed potter with back ache I can cope with.

"Has Adam tried to explain to you what the Alexander Technique is?" I ask

"Oh yes," says Helena cheerfully. "He told me it's all about posture, and I know my posture's bad and that you have to imagine things and learn to sit properly."

-Horrors- I thought- time to have a review of Adam's Alexander vocabulary.

Helena continued "He got me to lie on the floor and then he pulled my head for me. He said that's what you did."

-Worse and worse! A quiet word with Adam next lesson I think!

"It's a little more involved than that, Helena," I said, "We teach you how to use yourself better, how to become aware of habits you might have that are harmful to you."

"I don't smoke." She said.

"Good," I said, thinking, well at least her clothes won't stink then. "But I'm talking about habits to do with the way you use your muscles. You're probably not aware of them, and may not realise that bad habits could contribute to your backache. But very often we carry around with us a great deal more tension than we need, and it becomes so much of a habit we don't notice it anymore."

"Oh, right! Well anyway, can I come and I want to bring my husband too. He needs lessons, he wraps his legs up round the kitchen chair and Adam tells him he shouldn't."

Privately it occurs to me that Adam has turned into the Alexander police spy with regard to his brother and sister-in-law and must be a complete pain. I hope he isn't going to carry on like that if they have lessons with me.

Helena books a double lesson for herself and her husband for Thursday evening, 6.00 and 6.40pm

As I put the phone down I ponder over Adam a bit. He does, now I come to think about it, rave on a lot about what the Technique has done for him. He is a dedicated semi-supinist, I never had any trouble getting him to lie down, and often gives me blow by blow accounts of what has happened to him in semi-supine. I must confess I haven't paid too much attention. He talks about volcanic releases and amazing undoings.

He has talked a fair bit about his brother Matthew and his sister-in-law Helena, but it goes in one ear and out the other. All I can remember of what he's said about her is that she's Swedish.

The First Lesson

Helena and Matthew arrived promptly at 6.00pm . They are both tall, and would be taller if they didn't pull down so much! I asked them both to take a seat and I sit down with them, my usual practise at the start of a first lesson, just so I've got an idea of who and what I'm dealing with.

Matthew wrapped his extremely long legs up in an amazing knot; knees crossed, ankles crossed and the resulting spiral then entwined around the chair legs. Pushed to the back of the chair, he has arms folded, chest collapsed, neck drooped forward and head pulled back. And he's frowning. He is an elongated version of Adam, but works with computers. Adam says he is not artistic, although he plays the guitar. Helena on the other hand, sits on the edge of her chair. She is very round shouldered, but smiling. I decide to start with her.

"I've had back pain for some years now." She said. "Maybe six years, and it's getting worse. When I have to stand at the bus stop waiting for a bus to my studio it's sometimes so bad that I have to go home. If the bus is late I get into a real panic. And Matthew and I used to like walking in the country but now I find I can't get over the styles. I'm getting old perhaps. I'm certainly getting stiff."

"Have you seen a doctor about your back pain?" I asked, "Or anyone else?"

"Yes. She (the doctor) said I could have X-rays if I liked but that she thought I just had very bad posture. My mother was always telling me to sit up straight, but I never could, it's just so tiring."

While she talks to me Helena is smiling and seems happy. She waves her hands around a lot and I can see that her shoulders are stiff simply from the way her arms fail to move as she waves her hands. She looks like one solid block from neck to waist.

"I sometimes get really bad bouts of pain, sometimes when I've been throwing clay in the studio, especially in winter when it's also very cold. I have to ask Matthew to come and get me. It's a bit

frightening, I feel disabled, but I usually am alright if I lie flat on the floor for a few days. I don't want any kind of manipulation. I do feel tense though, well, a bit, sometimes a lot, in my shoulders."

"That's okay," I replied. "We don't manipulate like osteopaths. I'm not going to wrap you up and then crunch you. We use our hands to help guide musculature into a better state of co-ordination. It's quite gentle work and shouldn't hurt at all."

Well, let's start. I'd like you to come and stand in front of this chair, as if you were going to sit in it, and I am going to put my hands on your back and neck."

Helena stood up and walked the two steps over to my teaching chair. She turned to it and stood gazing at the seat.

"Would you like to turn round? I'm going to ask you to sit in the chair in a minute."

"Oh, how silly of me." She said. "I just got confused, I wasn't sure what you wanted me to do."

I used to be very surprised at this kind of behaviour, especially if I had explained carefully what I wanted. It seemed odd that someone couldn't carry out such a simple instruction. But I have found over the years that such disorientation is not as unusual as I first thought, and I have noticed that people who do get confused by such a simple request are often those who have what I consider to be very poor use.

If your use really is poor and you have a somewhat blunt sensory appreciation of yourself, it is perhaps not surprising that you would experience spatial confusion. The thing is, people think that such confusion is often associated with mental or emotion disturbances, and so if it happens to them they find it worrying. I think it's much simpler than that, in some cases, and that it really is a question of balance and co-ordination.

"Don't worry Helena, lots of people do that. It's a bit of an unusual thing to ask."

Relieved, Helena turned round and I suggested she look out of the window. We have some beautiful trees in the garden, which are easy on the eye and serve to attract attention away from the strangeness of what we are going to do.

Standing beside Helena I notice that actually she has broad shoulders, like so many tall Scandinavian women she is (or should be) quite sporty looking, almost athletic. But at present those lovely shoulders are very rounded, along with the whole of the upper back and she has slightly bow legs. She breathes rather shallowly, but at least she does breathe through her nose. That's a good start.

I put my left hand up on the base of her neck. As I expected, her neck feels like it has been concertinaed down for years. My right hand I put lightly on the crown of her head.

"Shall I sit down?" she asked.

"Yes, do." I said, realising that even a short amount of time standing still is difficult for her. I think the whole thing is going to be tricky because I rather suspect she can neither stand nor sit for very long. So I will have to keep moving her frequently so as not to tire her out, or cause her to stiffen more.

Keeping my hand on her neck I say to her "Part of what this work is about is learning to use ourselves in a better way. You might think of it as a more appropriate way, or a more efficient way. The way we go about our daily lives, the way we walk, or sit, or any movement we make, we will do in accordance with habit. The way we've always done things."

"I don't know what you mean.," said Helena , "I thought you were going to show me how to sit properly."

-Coo give me a chance- I thought, -you've only been here five minutes!-

"We'll get to that a bit later." I said

"Oh I'm always in a rush." said Helena .

This is the thing with new pupils, where do you start? They give you so many leads, but also so many blind alleys. It would be very tempting to plunge into explanations about non-end gaining, or inhibition, or not doing it. But I think that Helena is not actually in any state to hear much at all. Now that I have my hands on her she reminds me of a nervous horse, liable to shy at any moment. I am mindful of Walter telling us to make soothing noises at pupils, that they need calming down. And that is absolutely right. I could go on to Helena about all sorts of things, but I know she won't understand me. She is in a state of hyper excitability, due probably to years of back pain. Pain is after all a very strong stimulus indeed, and the nervous system is constantly alert, constantly over excited, jumpy if you like. You can't expect such a person to be able to make change easily. It's a bit like trying to stop a runaway train.

"Just sit in the chair for a while whilst I put my hands on your back."

"Your hands are very warm, it feel nice."

I feel like saying "Jolly good." Like Walter does, but I am not an eighty year old silver haired gent, so I inhibit, and continue the soothing noises whilst directing my hands into Helena 's back and neck. I sometimes think that Walter takes the soothing noises bit too far, telling the pupils to simply look out of the window and let him do all the work and that they have to *do nothing* . But I also recognise that his skill with his hands is so great that he can achieve this very easily. He will always be able to give a pupil a very strong sense of going up, and all he wants is for them to let him do that. " Leave it to me. " he used to say. I remember so well when I was training having various burning issues that I wanted to take up with Walter. But the only chance you got to talk to him was when he was working on you. So you'd save up these all important questions, the questions that would really pin him down as to what was going on. And you'd go into his teaching room and be greeted by that beaming smile, two seconds later his hand was on your neck and you'd just forget everything you wanted to ask. It didn't seem important anymore, you were just going up and all was right with the world.

But I don't expect to be able to give such a powerful experience as that, even after 15 years teaching, so I should talk a little to Helena about the Alexander Technique.

"As this is the first lesson, I want to keep it quite simple. We can explore things in detail as we go on. But for today the best thing you can think about is this. You have told me you have a lot of back pain and that you have bad posture. You have also mentioned that you are tense. These things are connected, and together they have the effect of making you shrink, making you, as we say, pull down."

"Is that what Adam meant?" asked Helena .

"Yes, I expect so."

"You know, I have got shorter. I saw an old friend at Christmas when I went back to Sweden and she said to me " Helena , you have shrunk." I was very cross with her, especially as I thought she might be right. I do try to stand up properly."

"Well, don't try! At least not in the way you usually do. If you try to straighten up, you'll just make your self more tense. What you need to do is simpler than that, you've got to stop pulling down."

"How?"

"I just want you to think. As we go on I'll explain why I want you to think rather than do, but for now I'd like you to think about your neck."

Helena 's neck immediately wriggled under my hand. Oh boy!

" Here is your neck." I said. "Under my hand. And of course your head is above it and the rest of your back is below it. What I'd like you to do is think about your neck. Talk to it if you like. And what I want you to talk to you neck about is not being so tense, ask it to release some tension. You see because your head is above your neck, if your neck muscles are very very stiff and tight they are going to drag on your head and pull it down. And we don't want that, it leads to all sorts of problems.

Now the reason I want you to ask your neck to release, to undo some of the tension is so that this drag on the head can stop and your head can go up a bit.

Here's my other hand on the top of your head and so you can literally think your head up into my hand."

Helena of course, in her excitable state, is mad keen to do what I ask and starts to stretch her neck out and raise her eyebrows. "This all right?"

"The thing about release is that it is a letting go process, an allowing process, so you have to ask your neck to do it for you. Rather as if you were asking a good friend for a favour."

"Oh," said Helena, and well she might. But bit by bit she is responding to my hands and quite suddenly her neck undoes and her head goes up.

"Oh! That feels really odd, what did you do to me?"

"I did nothing. I simply encouraged your neck to release as we've been saying. Now I'd like you to come over to the table here and I'm going to show you how to lie down so that you can do this at home.

"Ah," said Helena . "Adam's always lying on the floor, even when he comes to dinner!"

"Well next time he comes, ask him to demonstrate good use whilst washing up!" I said. Helena giggled.

Helena got up on the table very stiffly and lay down as I showed her. She needed a big stack of Readers Digests under her head to support her and her shoulders were nowhere near the table. She expressed pain in her back immediately. So I went and fetched my sheepskin to give her some more padding.

"You, see a firm surface will help your back to start to change." I began

"I can't do this." she said "it hurts too much, I think I'm going to get stuck." Her voice starts to rise in panic and Matthew, who up till now has been taking a vacation on planet Zog, starts to unwrap himself from his chair.

"Okay, lets get you up then. Just turn slowly on to one side. Turn your head first and then let yourself roll. I will support you. Take all the time you need."

Helena successfully does what I ask and Matthew subsides back to Zog land. Helena sits in a collapsed heap on the side of the table.

Surprisingly she says "Well, I can't do that bit, but I might have a go at the neck bit. When can I come again?"

Hiding my surprise, I book her in for two lessons a week for the next three weeks. Then I give Matthew his lesson whilst Helena listens to my explanations to him and giggles at him and makes faces behind his back. He too wants lessons but fortunately (for me) they can't both come at the same time.

And that was Helena 's first lesson.

The next day Adam came for his regular weekly lesson. " Helena loved it." He said. "She told me she felt as if your hands had dipped her in compost and made her grow!"-Well,- not an analogy I've come across before, but I suppose it's on the right lines!

The Second Lesson

Helena came in, flushed from the cold. It is a chilly spring day and she is wrapped up in layers of scarves hiding her face. Only her nose sticks out, and it's pink. She unwinds herself from the cocooning scarves and follows me into the teaching room, chattering as she goes.

"It's cold today, my hands are really cold and my wrists ache with it. I put an extra vest on because I think it helps me not to get so stiff if I'm warm. How are you?"

I recall Walter telling us that F.M. hated people asking him how he was, because of course no one has any idea how they are because their sensory appreciation is unreliable. He apparently told the nurses off for asking him that when he was ill as an old man. I however recognise the question as one of those social niceties and say "Fine, thank you."

"It's that chair thing again isn't it?"

"It is indeed that chair thing again, and this time we're going to think about it a bit more. Come and stand in front of the chair."

Helena complies and clasps her hands in front of her.

"Just let your hands rest at your sides." I ask her.

"But it feel so much more comfortable like this" she complained.

"Possibly it does," I said "But you see, it is excessive tension that makes you seek the familiar stance and if we're going to change that you can't take too much notice of what things feel like. It's not necessarily how they are. It might feel comfortable to stand with your hands clasped, but you're actually re-enforcing the tension patterns in your arms and back."

"Oh," she said "Just like Matthew and his legs. I could never understand how he could possibly be comfortable doing that but he always said he was."

"That's right, just like Matthew and his legs."

Whilst we are talking, I have my hands in what I privately think of as my favourite position number one. This is where I have my left hand around the base of Helena 's neck and my right hand round the side of her ribs. I can feel so much of her breathing, or lack off, here and encourage her ribs to start to free up without too much interference.

"You remember last week we talked about the neck and how it was useful to talk to it?"

"Ohhh yes! I've been doing that" she said "Do you know it's quite good fun."

Helena starts off on some track about what she considers good fun and I reflect that she makes me feel like a school marm who needs to keep saying 'Back to work Helena' But when all is said and done, she is paying me to teach her. Her hands are by her side now but her fingers are busily crossing and uncrossing themselves. I wonder if she realises that?

"Okay I'm going to ask you to sit down, but before you do so, I want you to ask yourself not to stiffen your neck muscles and drag your head down. Now if you're going to manage that, you've got to give yourself a bit of time to work it out, a bit of time to prevent yourself from simply stiffening and pulling down when you sit."

"It feels to me as if you are pushing your hand into my neck when I sit down." said Helena . "Do you want me to put my head in a different place?"

"No." I said "I want you to stop pulling it back in the first place. You see if you put it in what you think is the right place, the right position, you are simply adding yet another layer of tension on to the layers that are already there. And it does no good, you've got to get to the basic problem."

"My pots are a bit like that sometimes, well not my pots, my ceramic sculptures. If I've not got what I want it's often better to chuck the whole thing in the bin than to try adding extra bits on." She giggled.

"I hope you don't want to chuck me in the bin." She said.

" Not at all," I said wondering if I would, before I'd finished with her, and reflecting it's time for a bit of an Alexander information pack.

"These muscles here," I told her, outlining her occiput with my fingers, "you can consider as the beginning of the neck. It's very high up."

"What, right up there?"

"Yes, right up there. That's where your head stops and your neck starts, that's where your head sits on the first vertebrae of the spine."

"But I though the spine was just your back bone." Said Helena .

"Yes it is, but it starts all the way up here and goes right down to the very base of your body, into your pelvis."

"Well, imagine that!" exclaimed Helena , wriggling her head experimentally. She then started telling me about her Father and his back problem. This is the thing with Helena , the minute I start to give her any sort of information, she's up and running with it, and I feel like I'm not getting to the basics with her. So, back to the soothing noises. She has at least got used to me standing her up and sitting her down. I've not said too much about it all yet as I've not had a chance. I think Helena is someone I'm going to have to catch unawares.

As she chatters on, her hands quieten down, I am slowly but surely taking her up and despite her chatter, her breathing is lengthening a bit and becoming deeper.

"I feel a bit taller.," she said suddenly. "And I feel sort of light, and a bit like I've been drinking champagne. It's wonderful."

"Good." I said "And the thing is, I can teach you to get this for yourself." *if you let me* I think to myself.

"If you can, I'd like you to lie down at home, as I showed you. Don't do it for longer than 3-5 minutes and make sure you don't lie in a draft, or on a concrete floor. Put a duvet and a couple of rugs down on a carpeted floor and give it a go. Do it every day and then tell me how you get on. Don't stay there longer than that yet."

"Okay, I'll give it a go. Oh I do feel taller. See you on Thursday."

And she wrapped herself up in all her scarves again, stiffening her neck as she did so and stomped down the steps.

"Bye Helena ." I said.

Lesson Three

I have decided I'm going to talk to Helena about inhibition and direction today. I'll maybe not use those words, in fact I definitely won't use those words...yet! but I do want to get some sort of an idea across to her about stopping.

Helena came in looking pale. "My back is really painful" she complained. "It hurts more than ever."

-My heart sinks- it's really just what you don't want your pupils to say to you!

"Have you been doing anything unusual?" I asked her.

"No, nothing, just work."

"What work?"

"You know, the carpet repairs."

"Actually Helena , I don't know, you've not said anything to me about carpet repairs. Please tell me what you do."

Helena treats me to a five-minute lecture on antique Kilims and carpets before finally telling me that she has a part time job repairing them. It often involves her going to some cold draughty old house in the counties to repair some dirty great old carpet that the owners Great Danes have chewed.

"With these big carpets, they can't be moved easily. Of course if they are valuable antiques, then they get carried away by specialised firms and put on big frames.," said Helena "But the little company I work for is a bit more down market than that. We do things more cheaply and it means repairing the carpet where it is. They give us cups of tea and sometimes scones."

"I'm glad they feed you, but how do you repair these carpets? They must be very heavy to lift surely?"

"Oh, you can't lift them. You sit cross-legged on the floor and work on then. You sort of scrunch up the bit you need to work on to pull it off the floor. Sometimes I put a chair or something underneath it to hold up the bit I need. We don't do really big jobs, only where the damage is in a fairly small area and it's not too difficult to get at. Sometimes it's lots of small areas and I can be there all day."

"So what do you do then? Sew it or what?"

"Well yes, I sew it."

"That must be hard on your fingers." I said. "Do you wear thimbles or cotton gloves to protect your hands?"

Helena laughed. "It's much harder than that. I have to use pliers to pull the needles from one side of the carpet to the other, if I'm doing a repair on the edge for example. Sometimes I use very big curved needles, I don't wear a thimble. I often wear leather gloves."

"So what you do, is you work in the cold, yet again, hauling round a heavy carpet. Then you sit cross legged on the cold floor for hours pulling a needle through the carpet with tremendous force and effort and you get back ache!"

"If you put it like that, well yes, I suppose I do. Could you show me how to sit cross-legged properly? I know my posture is really bad when I do that."

While Helena has been talking to me, I have had her sitting in the chair and I have been taking her shoulders and encouraging a little widening in her chest and a little freeing of her ribs. She is very fixed and the shape of her upper back is more rounded than even in the first two lessons. But she does respond to the stimulus my hands offer her.

I'd like to tell her everything at once of course. I'd like to tell her about inhibition and direction and habits and non-end gaining, and it is right that I should tell her all these things and show her how to apply them for herself. But she is in a lot of pain and not much of what I need to say is going to make sense. I decide to go for explaining use to her, taking my lead from her request to be told how to sit cross-legged properly. I am mindful again of Walter and his masterly indirect approach to imparting information.

I remember him in Australia talking to our students as he worked on them. He and Dylis had come out to Australia for both a holiday and to visit our training course in Melbourne . We were very happy to have them, and they came in every morning for about a week. Both Walter and Dylis gave turns to the students and Walter gave lectures. Dylis of course wanted to see how I was putting into practise the training she had given me in taking hands on groups. Listening to Walter as he gave turns was like listening to a master storyteller. He would talk about a huge variety of topics, somehow always seeming to pick something pertinent to the person he was working on, even though he had never met them and knew nothing about them. It was as if he had an uncanny knack of picking something they would understand. I remember him talking to Tim York about sailing, and making analogies about having sails at the right degrees of tension for the conditions of the winds, and having all the ropes at the right tension levels and all sorts of things that I knew not wot of. Tim had been, in his time, a very keen sailor and had had a lot to do with boats. He said afterwards Walter must have smelt the salt behind his ears.

Walter rarely asked people what they did, he just bumbled away whilst taking his pupil slowly but surely up and out. He talked in what I called to myself the first person once removed tense. He used phrases such as " in our work, what we find is---- there is a tendency to pull the head back" or "Of course what we're looking for in our work is thoracic mobility" and then he'd describe a rib movement. It took some while to realise he was talking about *your* ribs, about *your* head. That *you* were pulling your head back, that *you* were tightening your ribs.

I know that the reason Walter did use such a round about route to giving information was that he felt it was important not to excite people's fear reflexes, because that would only cause them to pull their heads back more. He indicated that if you talked to people directly about what was going on they were more inclined to try and get things right, and therefore to 'do' it, and, once more, simply stiffen their necks and pull their heads back..

From my point of view, I could tell that Helena was definitely of the nervous horse variety of pupil, who would probably react with alarm at the thought that she might be doing something wrong, but on the other hand I have always felt that people responded well to information, if it could be presented in a way they could relate to.

I decided, that as Helena was, after all, beginning to respond quite nicely to the work and that I could chat to her about use. I wasn't going to put her on the table again, as it clearly did not do her any good at this stage, better that she lie down on her own. I can move her quite easily in a crude sort of way and so decide to start with that. She's sitting in the chair and I say to her " Helena , do you remember when you rang me up and asked about lessons I mentioned habits and you though I was talking about smoking?"

"Oh, yes! I remember, Adam has gone on at me about bad habits but I didn't know what he was talking about. He has bad habits too, well I suppose they are habits, he's always doing it."

"Doing what?" I asked, thinking, -I've been sidetracked again- but maybe it will go somewhere

"Well, he tells me off if I interrupt him when he's talking. He says it's bad manners and that people don't listen properly and the thing is, he's so pompous about it that it makes me want to interrupt him on purpose!" Helena 's hand flew to her mouth

"Oh, you won't tell him I said that will you? I mean I'm very fond of him, but.."

"No, I'll say nothing, but perhaps you have given me a good example. Adam's habit is obviously annoying, but at least he knows he does it, do you think?"

"No!" said Helena definitely. "It's so ingrained I think it's automatic."

"Habits are like that." I said, "automatic, and then it's as if they govern us, not the other way round, and they often are not useful habits and can cause us problems. What we are doing in the Alexander work is becoming more aware of these habits so that we can choose whether or not to continue with them, or whether we could change them."

"What sort of habits?" asked Helena

"Well, habits to do with the way you move for example, how much tension you use just to stand up from this chair. And that is not just a question of physical tension, or muscular effort, it's also a question of the way you think about it, and how you respond to your own thinking. For example if you're sitting in your chair at home and you hear the phone ring, you want to get to it quickly. So you're likely to just leap out of the chair without thought and in so doing you will slip into your usual way of leaping out of the chair, which will include stiffening your neck and pulling your head back....."

Helena gives me a wicked grin "I often let the answer phone cut in, so I know who's calling! But I think I see what you're getting at, it's looking at things with fresh eyes isn't it?"

"Ummm..."

Helena continued. "Sometimes, when I want to make something different in clay, and I don't know what I want to do, or I think I have an idea but I can't quite find it, I sort of play with the clay as if I were a child. Or I try not to think about it, I make some kind of mental switch in my head, because if I don't, I find I just produce the same piece of work over and over again. It's alright doing variations, but when it goes too far, it's just stale."

"That's right!" I said, "So what we need to do is take a fresh look at the way you get out of a chair."

"Thanks. I'll see you next Tuesday then."

Helena grabbed her pen and dragged her chequebook out from her bag. She began to write a cheque with great vigour. I said nothing. Suddenly she laughed. "This is what you mean isn't it? I'm always in such a rush!"

"Yes. One thing we need to look at is how to simply stop. See you next Tuesday."

Lesson Four

Helena came in and handed me a small glass jar. It contained the fee for the lesson.

"I put the money in here." She said, so that I wouldn't have to write out a cheque. Every time I put a pound coin in the jar, I think about releasing my neck. Then when I screw the jar top back on, I think about sending my head up, like you told me. I call it my stop jar, because it makes me think."

As she is talking Helena is unwinding acres of scarves again, green and blue silk ones. Every time she passes her hands round the back of her neck to unwind another layer, I see her head pull back and her shoulders raise up. Still, she has at least given her self a 'stop' jar, even if it means I'm paid in parking meter change. Helena follows my eyes to the jar.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind all that change," she said.

"No, it'll be handy for the kids lunch money." I replied.

I have been thinking about Helena and how she will learn the Alexander Technique. It is difficult that she can't lie down, because I have found that it is a good time for people to learn to undo and to direct for themselves. You can't do much if you are lying on the floor, you can't fall off it, you do at least have to make the effort to get down there, which draws your attention to why you are doing it (hopefully!)

Of course you can do it badly, and it is surprising how many pupils will forget such basics as having their knees bent and their feet on the floor. I always feel that any lying down, however short, is better than none.

Helena walks over to the chair.

"I have been doing a bit of that semi-supine, you know, lying down. But I can't stay there very long and I get bored very quickly." said Helena . "Matthew seems to like it, he does it every day and I must say he does already look a bit straighter. You know he's got this leather jacket? Well when it's hanging up it looks as if he's still in it, and I can see how crooked his shoulders were. I don't think he looks so crooked now, do you?"

"No, he doesn't. But he looks straighter because his use has improved, rather than him straightening up."

"Yes, I'm beginning to realise that." Said Helena , "He tries to explain the Alexander Technique to me you know. But I've told him to shut up! I'd rather learn it in my own way. He and Adam gang up on me and tell me I'm doing it all wrong, beastly pair!"

"I wouldn't worry about it Helena . Mr Alexander always said that his technique was about the individual, not a set of fixed rules. In fact the whole thing is about not being fixed, but being able to make more flexible choices. If Adam and Mathew think they are better at it than you, they are sadly

mistaken. It's not a competitive thing. Neither is it about being straight. In fact Walter Carrington, who trained me, often told us a nice story about F.M. and his best pupil."

"F.M.?" queried Helena

"That was Mr Alexander's initials, F.M. for Fredrick Matthias."

"Sounds Scottish to me, not Australian." Remarked Helena .

"Yes, that's right, he was of Scottish descent. I believe his family were third generation. He was born in Tasmania you know, Van Demons land, it was a convict settlement island.

"What did his ancestors do to get deported?" asked Helena .

"I must admit, I'm not sure. I think it was something to do with being on the equivalent of a civil rights march or something like that."

"Not sheep stealing then? Even in Sweden we read Great Expectations you know!"

"Er, no. Not sheep stealing." I replied, wondering how Helena got from F.M to Charles Dickens. No wonder I can't seem to get much across to her, she has a mind like a grasshopper.

" So I was telling you about F.M's so called best pupil."

"Oh yes, who was that?"

" Well, when F.M taught in some rooms in Ashley place in London , there was a waiting room where pupils sat before their lesson with him. Apparently one day F.M. told a few of the students he was training, that his best pupil was in the waiting room. So they trooped along to take a discreet look. But they came back disappointed. There was no one there they said, no one but an old lady who was very twisted.

"She," said F.M. "Is my best pupil!"

What he was referring to wasn't her structure, but her ability to inhibit and direct, to make the best possible use of herself. Walter often told us this story to point out to us that straightness isn't the aim of our work. It isn't a useful thing to think about. It is certainly true that as people learn to stop pulling down, they will tend to straighten up. But the point is, of itself, straightness is not a reliable judgement of good or poor use."

Helena pondered. "We have jam like that." She said finally.

"Jam?" I said, totally baffled.

"Yes, a Swedish jam made from some berries that you only find in particular areas of Sweden . They are a sort of yellowy orange. But when you pick them and cook them, they change colour to a sort of muddy brown. It doesn't look good, but it tastes wonderful. We eat it hot with ice cream.

While Helena and I have been talking, I have continued to gradually take her up a little. We are still only fifteen minutes into the lesson. Suddenly, just as she is going up nicely, she curls up in pain.

"Oh, my back, my back." She collapses down into the chair and leans forward, her back rounded, her head almost between her knees.

"Would you like a glass of water?" I asked.

She smiled. "Yes please, and could you get me my pain killers. I think you'd better phone Mathew for me, if you would."

Her face is grey with pain and I decide to do as she asks.

Fetching her the pain killers I hear her saying she's sorry to cause such a fuss, and that she is disappointed, because she did think she was beginning to change.

"I think so too Helena , " I said "Occasionally as things undo it can be a bit painful. Although not usually as bad as you are experiencing."

"You mean this could be a good pain?" she smiles wanly

"Could be." I said.

I phoned Mathew who, the instant he heard my voice said. " Helena 's back's gone hasn't it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"I'll be there." said Matthew and put the phone down.

Whilst we waited for Mathew I gently rubbed Helena 's back and she chattered away. Mathew arrived and he and I between us we helped Helena to the car.

"Let me know how you are tomorrow," I said as she eased into the passenger seat.

And that was Helena 's fourth lesson.

Helena rang me the next evening. "I'm much better," she said. "I've been lying in bed, but I've kept my knees bent and I've been directing them up to the ceiling, and I've been thinking about widening my back. It really has helped. And I had a hot shower and carried on with the pain killers. I'm going to take a couple of days off work, but I don't want to miss my next lesson. Can I still come?"

"Of course." I replied.

Now that I have given Helena four lessons, I have some idea of her use. The concertina like compression of her neck is obvious, but it is only part of the picture. She uses her hands and arms a great deal, both when she throws clay and does her ceramic work, and when she's repairing carpets. Her arms are very contracted, and pulled up so that her shoulders are not only rounded, but also raised.

Her arms are so contracted that it reminds me a little of bricklayers arms. Sometimes in the summer, you see bricklayers or other sons of toil displayed in all their glory. The sun is shining and their shirt is off. It has often struck me that you hardly ever see them with their arms straight. I don't just mean not working, I mean that when their arms are casually at their sides, relaxed, so to speak, their elbows are still bent. There is so much tension and shortening in all the muscles of the arms that it's as if it's no longer possible to straighten them. Helena 's are like that, except not so muscled of course. In her it is a ring of shortening that runs right throughout the whole shoulder girdle, pulling the clavicles together at the front, making her chest somewhat collapsed, and rounding her upper back. Her shoulder blades are permanently hitched up, and her neck pulled, tortoise like, into her torso.

Her lower back is pulled in, is tight and seems very weak. Her legs are drawn up into her torso, just as her arms are drawn into her back. Her joints are very stiff. She says she feels like the tin man in The Wizard of Oz, and I can see what she means.

I'm very glad that she wants to continue to come, as I do think the technique can help her a lot, and she is getting the idea of it.

Lesson Five

To my surprise, Helena made it for her lesson. She came in wrapped in the ever-present scarves, wearing Matthews leather jacket.

"Hello," she said "I feel much better, and I think I'm beginning to undo a bit."

I handed her her little jar and she laughed and gave me an envelope full of coins.

Working on her in the chair, I gently took her neck and encouraged her to release a little in order to send her head up out of her shoulders. When I asked her to do this she glazed over and held her breath. So I asked her to allow herself to continue breathing and just to think of sending the head forward and up, not to actually do it. This time she left herself alone nicely and her head unglued itself a little from her neck and actually went forward and up. -Good old F.M.- I thought- this stuff does work.

I started to explain to Helena what direction was, how it was a natural process that we wanted to encourage. For once she listened quietly and continued to go up as I worked on her. This success went to my head and so I started talking to her about inhibition, in a round about sort of way. How it was part of direction, in the sense that if you stopped doing the wrong thing, the right thing would do itself because that was the way a human being was designed.

Helena pondered. Eventually she said "It's a bit like not picking your spots when you're a teenager isn't it?"

"Well, I suppose that's one way of looking at it." I said .

"I think I understand now what Adam meant when he told me I pulled down wiping my feet on his door mat. But you see, we, well certainly in my family, were brought up to be very clean in the house. We take our shoes off in the house. I found it very odd that in England people keep their outdoor shoes on when they come inside. I mean it's so dirty isn't it? I suppose that where we lived, in the country, you nearly always got muddy when you went out, so of course you would take your shoes off when you came in. We had a porch in front of the house and out door shoes lived there. When we came in, we would put on a pair of slippers, or sometimes some sort of soft clogs that my father was fond of. We all had a pair, and we kept some for visitors too. Everybody did that, we weren't that unusual.

I suppose it's different nowadays, and perhaps it's different in the city. But you see, because I keep my shoes on when I come into a house, I make sure there is nothing on the soles of them. So I wipe my feet very thoroughly. But I used to do it very heavily, I can see that now." Helena laughed. "You'll have to teach me how to wipe my feet." She said.

" You don't have to learn to do everything separately." I said. "The idea is to improve your use so that whatever you do, you use less tension and effort. Next time you want to wipe your feet, ask your neck to release and send your head up as you do it."

Helena is quiet for a while and I continue to work on her. Taking her right shoulder, I slip my hand up high under her armpit and put the other over her scapular. Directing my hands into her I am aware that she is pulling down much less through her middle, as if her diaphragm were not so tight. This in turn enables her shoulders to release and widen. Her right shoulder releases under my hand and eases away from her neck. She notices.

"Oh, that feels so strange, as if I have one really butch wide shoulder."

"Butch?" I invite

"Yes, I always had wide shoulders and I got teased about it at school."

"Were you that unusual?" I asked

"No, not really." Helena replied. "You know what children can be like. It was just that they realised I was sensitive about it and so they teased me. I think that was when I started to pull them in, to try and make them look narrower. I was always tall for my age too, even in Sweden, and I didn't want to stand out, so I suppose I pulled down then to."

"Perhaps you did." I said. "Patterns of misuse can start quite young for all sorts of reasons. Once we have a habit of pulling down, it is very hard to break, mostly because we don't notice it anymore, it becomes unconscious."

I moved round to Helena's left shoulder and gave her the same stimulus that side too. She went up a little more and her left shoulder too released. She started to giggle.

"You know, when you work on me, I feel as if I've been drinking champagne. It's wonderful, I really like it. I can't get the effect so strongly when I'm on my own, but a bit of it. Why is that?"

"Well," I said "You are learning a skill, and like any skill, you're always going to get a bit more when a teacher is guiding you than when you're on your own. But like any skill, the more you practise it, the better you'll get at it, till you can direct easily for yourself. It just takes time that's all. Do your shoulders still feel butch?" I asked.

Helena giggled "No," she said, "But my neck feels like ET's, all elongated. I still don't completely understand this forward and up bit. But perhaps you can explain next time. Right now I've got to go forward and up round Sainsbury's."

And Helena wound herself back in her scarves, shrugged into Matthew's jacket and left. I wonder if she'll give Mr Sainsbury a little jar full of pound coins.

Lesson Six

Before Helena came today I was reflecting that this would be her sixth lesson. Usually by this time, I hope to have given people a bit of an understanding of direction and inhibition, non-end gaining and the means whereby and have established the habit of semi-supine. But with Helena I'm not sure what I've achieved! I can't put her on the table at all, and she hasn't yet ventured on to the floor on her own. Since her attack of back pain she has done some directing whilst lying with her knees up on her bed. Well that's better than nothing I suppose.

Helena came in with orange and yellow scarves. "It's my early summer colours," she explained, noticing my look. "I wear the blue ones in the spring, and in the summer I wear these. It's a bit of a habit I suppose." She said, "But not a bad one, I hope!"

She rubbed her hands together and came over to the chair. "My shoulders feel so much better," she said. "They really feel different, as if they have widened but I don't feel like they stick out or anything. It feels natural, I like it. Adam says I have changed."

As usual Helena alternately chatters on, and falls quiet while I work on her. When she is quiet I impart little bits of information to her, or give her directions. This is the pattern of our lessons now. She is quite jumpy and hyper for the first ten minutes or so, and that time is spent quietening her down. Then in the next ten minutes she is receptive to new thought and ideas, and it is in that period

that I feel can tell her things. After that she starts to get drunk on going up and whilst its all useful stuff, there is no point in me trying to explain anything, just to continue to give her the experience of release and lightness is enough.

So I have a small window of opportunity in which to try and teach her something.

"You asked me last time about what forward and up meant." I said "And I thought it would be useful if we talked about that a bit."

"Yes," said Helena . "It's a bit odd isn't it? I mean you don't stretch my neck out or anything and yet, when I've had my lesson, I feel as if my neck has stretched, but somehow from the inside. I did have some physiotherapy some time ago, long before I came to you, and she actually pulled on my neck and twisted it from one side to the other. She said she was mobilising it. But it felt like agony to me and I always felt as if I was fighting her. It doesn't feel like that with you, it's a lot easier."

"Good." I said "That's because the way we use our hands, as Alexander Teachers is quite different to the way other therapists use theirs. We pay attention to our own use in order to help you improve yours."

"It certainly feels different. " said Helena , "And it's not just what you do is it? I know that now, because when Adam tried to pull on my head, the way you do, it didn't feel the same at all." She giggled "I suppose it would be a bit dreadful if it did!" she said "after all the training you do!"

"That's right!" I said. "The training programme is three years, and it's hard work. It's a very deceptive skill, it's not much of a spectator sport. A lot of what happens isn't directly discernable to the naked eye. And what is observable needs to be interpreted correctly. It's not as obvious as it might seem. By the way, I hope Adam isn't still trying to put his hands on you is he?"

"No, he's definitely not!" laughed Helena "He only did it the one time, and I think that was to try and persuade me to come for lessons. You see I kept asking him to explain what it was and he kept trying to tell me, but I couldn't understand what he was going on about. So he tried to show me. That's all it was. I don't think he fancies himself as an Alexander teacher, although he is absolutely fascinated by it all and clearly puts it into practise in his work. I was hoping that you would help me throwing clay, you know, just give me a few points about it sometime."

"Of course I will Helena ," I said. "In fact, what we'd, started on, head direction, is very relevant to throwing clay."

"What?" asked Helena , as well she might.

"You see," I said. "In these lessons, what I appear to do is to take you in and out of this chair. To move you from sitting to standing, and from standing to sitting. But there is more to it than that."

"Oh, I realise that." replied Helena . "Adam used to tell me about the chair bit and I got impatient with him, and said but surely anyone can stand up and sit down. But now I can see it's not just about what you do, but the way you do it."

"Exactly." I said, delighted that she made that connection, even if she was pulling her head back in order to say it. "The movement you see, from sitting to standing, and visa versa, demands a co-ordination of your head, your neck, your back and your legs. It demands that you co-ordinate those parts in a field of gravity and the way that you do that reveals the way you do everything. It is your use pattern. If you pull your head back when you sit in the chair, you will probably pull your head back with every movement you make, including throwing clay."

"I'm not sure about this gravity bit," said Helena . "What has that got to do with it?"

"Have you seen any pictures of astronauts in space, you know floating around attached to their space craft by some kind of umbilical cord?"

"Yes, I have, what about them?" asked Helena

"Well, in space they are outside of earth gravitational field, and it has an odd effect on them. They can't for example, exert enough muscular effort to straighten their limbs. It requires enormous efforts to do so. The pictures you see of them floating in space, show them with all their joints bent. Their hips and knees are bent, their elbows and wrists are bent."

"Bit like me sitting in this chair," remarked Helena .

"Yes, that's right, but you are in a field of gravity and they are not. If you were out in space you wouldn't need to sit down, your arms and legs would just fold up of their own accord. What happens is that the joints come to a point midway between their full range of movement."

"Midway?" queried Helena .

"Yes, I said. Neither fully straight nor fully bent, but half way in between. Take your elbow joint for example." I said, taking her elbow in my hand. When you sit in the chair here, I get you to rest your hands on your lap. That means your elbow is roughly midway in its range of movement possibilities" I straightened her arm. "This is fully straight, see? And this" I said, flexing her elbow so that I could fold her hand almost up to her shoulder "Is more or less fully bent, or flexed. The thing is, in order to straighten limbs, you need gravity. Take gravity away, and the limbs go to this mid point. It's the point where, roughly speaking, the muscles that straighten your arm, and the muscles that bend your arm, are operating at the same degree of contraction."

Helena looked a bit blank.

"It's all very interesting," she said "But my brain can't take it all in! can we leave the head forward and up bit for now."

"It's not that complicated Helena ." I said "The head going forward and up is what happens naturally when you stop pulling it back and down. That's all there is to it really."

"Oh, I know those 'that's all there is to it' things!" said Helena . "I used to teach pottery, and trying to teach people how to throw things on a wheel, I would say the same thing-you do this and this and this, and that's all there is to it!- I'd say, but they didn't seem to get it for quite a while. I suppose this is the same isn't it? A skill, and at first I'm going to throw wonky head directions instead of wonky pots!"

"It's true that this is a skill." I said, but the approach is different. "It's not a case of try, try, try again, it's a case of learning to allow things to happen, learning, not to try, not to do things. And that's because if we simply keep trying in the old way, we repeat the old tension patterns and nothing changes. But if we give ourselves a chance to stop and look at things differently, things can change. Next lesson, if you like, I'll tell you F.M's story of how he discovered his technique."

"I'd like that." said Helena .

We are near the end of the lesson now, and, as I have found in the previous two lesson's Helena starts to come up quite dramatically,- Helena 's extra inch---I call it to myself. It's as if she needs about twenty minutes of work to prepare the way for her to seem to suddenly go up.

This can be very confusing for people, and I have seen it before.

The confusion is that they then think it's something they, or I, have done at that particular moment that results in the release. But it isn't. At least, it isn't in my opinion. There isn't a magic button, or a magic thought that 'does' it. It is the gentle continuousness that does it. Of course people do get blinding flashes and fall off their donkeys, but like Saul, that only happens when they are actually on the road to Damascus . If you're going some other way, well you'll probably just stay on your donkey.

Ongoing lessons

Over the next three weeks, Helena continued to have two lessons a week, and then she and Matthew went away to Yorkshire for a short holiday. In those six lessons she changed quite a lot, so that she started the lessons in a better state than she had before. Up to then, it almost seemed as if with each lesson, we had to start again. But now she was able to sustain the improvement in her use between lessons.

Doing only chair work with her meant that in some ways the lessons were quite concentrated. Lots of pupils, when you put them on the table, take the opportunity for a quick rest. And it can be very valuable. For some pupils, practically the only way you can get them to stop is to get them to lie down. Of course I tell them that it's a dynamic procedure and so on but there is always the element of pleasurable relaxation when you put people on the table. You can tell them it's not about relaxation till you're blue in the face, but the fact is, if they lead busy lives as so many of them do, simply stopping and taking time out is going to have a relaxing effect on them, why deny it?

But with Helena , this was not possible so I had taught her the directions using the chair only. To get her to understand about the back lengthening I had taken her back in the chair so that she was not upright, but at an angle. When I first did this with her, she simply let her back round out and her chest collapse. Helping her to understand that if she directed her head up then her back muscles would respond differently was a slow process. It's not something you can teach in one go, and Helena was no different to any other pupils in the sense that she certainly didn't get it for several lessons. We tried it three or four times in each lesson. Each time I would relate it to standing up, in so much as it was the same things she needed to think about.

It also helped to highlight the fact that you don't have to work out how to do it, you've got to stick to principal and let your muscles work it out for you.

Gradually as Helena 's back and use improved, I was able to take her back in the chair and she maintained her direction nicely. It seemed to be very good for her, and I taught her to do it herself, and to not tighten her legs as she did so.

Alexander's Story

I had told her Alexander's story and she had been interested in the intensity of his research, his dedication to it and the fact that he was so tenacious about it all. In particular she liked the description of how he realised that his own sensory awareness was at fault, leading him to continue to make the same mistakes over and over again whilst thinking he'd got it all worked out.

"But," she said, delicately putting her finger on one of the techniques knottier problems "Obviously I shouldn't entirely take your word for if I'm right or not. Because if I did that then I'm passing my control over to you entirely aren't I."

"Yes," I said, that's right. "I don't see it as my job to tell you that I make better judgements than you do, I see it as my job to offer you the tools to make your own judgement. And one of those tools is the knowledge that sensory awareness is something to be thought about carefully."

"The other day, when I was throwing clay," said Helena , "I suddenly felt myself pulling my head back. So I thought about releasing my neck and sending my head up. The thing is, I've not felt it before at all. I know you've told me about it, and it wasn't that I didn't believe you. It's just that up to that point it did all seem rather vague. But do you know, I tried to explain what I'm doing to Sally, one of the people who share my studio and I simply couldn't explain it at all. I did say to her that I was releasing my neck and sending my head up and she just looked at me completely blankly and asked why. I tried to explain that it helped my arms but I think she just thinks I'm dippy or a bit strange." Helena laughed. "Adam used to say things like that to me too," she said "And I had no idea what he was talking about, but now I'm realising that it's just so difficult to explain, because you can't feel it until you feel it can you?"

Helena continued "I find it quite exciting now, it's a bit like opening up a new bag of clay and not knowing what you're going to make with it."

Lesson Thirteen

Helena and Mathew have been walking in Yorkshire for a week. She has come back fitter and very pleased with herself. Unwinding the scarves from her neck, she chatters about the Yorkshire scenery, how bleak she finds it but quite beautiful, so unlike Sweden . As she removes the scarves I notice that she no longer pulls her head back with each unwinding revolution. Well, she no longer pulls her head back quite so much.

Working on her in the chair as usual I find her much freer and easier to move. I comment on this.

"Oh yes," she said, "I've been thinking about it quite a lot when we were walking. When I started to get tired, I realised that I also started to pull down more. So I thought instead about sending my head up and it made a real difference to me. Of course we did have lots of stops and so on, and lots of drinks. We are not the sort of walkers who just want to get as many miles done as possible, we like to admire the view so it was easy when we stopped, to think about directing."

"That's great," I said. "I have been thinking that as it is so difficult for you to lie down that now would be the time to show you something else that you can do that can help you to understand direction even more."

"What's that?" asked Helena .

"It's a procedure that we use when we teach, to help us make the best use of ourselves. Like semi supine, it is a way of organising the limbs and back so that you can help encourage release. It's a position of mechanical advantage, but it has a nick name, we call it monkey."

Helena laughed. "You mean like monkeys in the zoo?" she asked

"Something like that!" I replied

"Show me," said Helena

"To start with we'll do it in a simple way. I'm going to ask you to begin to sit down in the chair, but instead of going all the way down to the seat of the chair, I will ask you to stop half way."

Because I only do chair work with Helena , she has had ample opportunity to discover that directing and inhibition are not stop start procedures. That it isn't enough just to stop, give directions and then sit down, but that if you're going to change your use, you need to continue to direct throughout the movement.

At first, like most pupils, she ran out of mental energy almost as soon as she started to sit down. Its a curious and a subtle blend of allowing a natural spring to take place in the whole system, and so it's easy,- and being very aware, very conscious of what you are doing and what you want. Overcoming the initial immediate response to the stimulus to sit down is only half the story. It's a good half but there's more to it. Helena is aware of this now. I had my hands up round her head and neck, one hand round her occiput, the other under her chin.

"Okay," I said "Let's give it a go. Keep asking your neck to remain free and your head to go forward and up, and let the joints of the legs bend as if you are going to sit down."

As I move her towards the chair, Helena sticks her bum out and pulls her head back. She giggles "I don't think that's what you're after is it?" she laughed.

"Not quite," I said. "Don't think about it so much. Just let it happen to you, rather than making it happen. Let gravity bend your joints for you rather than you pulling them down towards the chair."

This time Helena succeeds in leaving herself alone and there she is in a very respectable monkey.

"Now, give your self the directions again." I said. "Ask your neck to release and your back to lengthen and widen again. Direct your knees away from your back but keep sending a your head up.

Now let yourself straighten up again" I said.

"What do I do with my arms?" asked Helena , "they feel sort of dangly as if they would fall off."

"You can let them rest on the back of a chair." I replied "Or on a table. Here, let's try it."

I brought the chair round in front of her, and put my hands on her again.

"You're not going to sit me down are you?" asked Helena , stiffening in anticipation.

"No, I wouldn't do that." I said "This chair is for you to rest your hands on once you're in monkey.

So once more I took her up, asked her to release her neck and let herself continue to lengthen as she allowed her joints to bend to bring her into monkey. Then I put the backs of her hands on the rail of the chair. My teaching chair is ideal for this, which is why it's my teaching chair of course.

"I don't have any chairs like this." said Helena . "Can I use something else"

"Yes," I said. You can use anything of an appropriate height, and you can be in a higher or lower monkey accordingly. At first though, don't try to go too low as this will be more likely to make you stiffen. But you can rest your hands on a radiator, or a convenient table or the back of a sofa, or the kitchen sink. Anything really. Later, when you've got use to this, I can show you a step on where you can use this procedure to help you undo your hands and arms even more. But not yet."

"How long should I do it for?" asked Helena , "And will I stay there if the wind changes?"

"Um, probably not, but in any case it's not something you want to do in public you know, just at home, or in your studio. Don't do it for too long, maybe a couple of minutes at a time to start with. You can build it up gradually. It will help to strengthen your back."

"Do you know" said Helena , "that I can now lift all the gardening bags. Matthew gets these sacks of things like compost to go in the garden and he drags them into the garage and then moans about them, but I can lift them much better than he can!"

The coloured scarves are flung back on, and Helena dons Matthews leather jacket, which I assume has become hers as she has been wearing it for the last three weeks. She hands me another envelope with money in and lets herself out.

At the time Helena comes, I am usually just finishing a lesson with a student from Sussex University . He was doing a degree in computer studies and had got horrendous backache. He and Helena pass each other in the hall and are obviously interested in why each of them has lessons. Tom, the student, asks in a very round about sort of way, making little comments such as he noticed the way she flung her shoes off when she came in. Tom read a few books on the Alexander Technique and being by nature a repressed sort of individual, had latched onto inhibition as his salvation.

I had been gently trying to get him to consider inhibition and direction as two sides of a coin and to reconsider what inhibition was and what it was for. But Tom was a real gung-ho inhibitor! It was the key to everything. I think that actually it was just that he'd been so slowed down by the vast amount of dope that he'd smoked that inhibition, as he understood it, in the sense of literally doing nothing, simply validated his preferred lifestyle, which was largely spent horizontal.

Helena on the other hand was quite direct about her perceptions of Tom. You wouldn't think she'd spot so much merely passing him in the hallway but she did. She called him the sleepwalker, which was quite accurate, but as the weeks went on for them both, they were both changing and one day Helena commented that Tom looked as if he was beginning to wake up.

Lesson Fourteen

"Do you know." said Helena at the beginning of our 14 th Lesson, when Tom had gone, and she's heard the front door close behind him. "That young man definitely looks different. He's definitely improved."

"In what way?" I asked her.

"He looks much more alive somehow, not so withdrawn and pinched. He always looked to me as if he was afraid of something, or as if he was very moody. Also he looked a bit, you know, high. I suppose he just looks better. He's very straight though isn't he? That hasn't changed."

"That's true." I said "His back is very straight, but you know that is not necessarily an indication of good use. People can have a very straight back because it is locked in a position, or held that way. It can be just as compressed as a back that's all pulled in."

"You mean, you can't judge a book by looking at his cover." Remarked Helena .

"Not entirely!"

Whilst Helena is in her first ten minutes chat mode, I am easing her up and out. She is a very responsive student, who both quietens down and goes up at the same time. Although she is tricky to work on, she is very rewarding.

Her upper back was so rounded and compressed that I suspect that her connective tissue had adaptively shortened and that was why she found it so difficult to undo, and so painful. She is able to

respond to direction well now, whereas at first I felt that much of what I did simply didn't get to first base with her. Her joints move much more freely now, there is much less gripping round her hips and knees; even the bow shape of her legs has diminished somewhat.

"Do you know, she said. "I have a friend, Sylvie, who has been doing a pattern cutting course. You know, designing clothes and so on. Well she wanted to use me last year as a model, because she had to do a project on cutting a pattern for someone who was difficult to fit. Someone who was perhaps uneven in some way. She asked me because of my back. If I had a jacket or something like that, it would always hang funny at the back. So her project was to cut the jacket to look straight. But when the jacket was hanging up on its own, the back was a lot lower than the front. I wasn't very happy about it.

Anyway, she spent a long time cutting this pattern and making up this jacket. But since I've been having lessons I have changed shape so much that the jacket looks all wrong and Sylvie is cross! But I am delighted.

Actually, that's why I wear Matthews jacket so much, because it now looks better on me than on him!"

Helena continued to have lessons and we explored various procedures such as hands on the back of the chair. She continued to make steady progress and now feels she has a positive way of working with her back problems. She was great fun to teach because she asked such clear questions and because she so often could relate the ideas to her own creative processes. I enjoyed our lessons together.