

Trauma, Emotion and the Alexander Technique

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'The Embodied Nature of Trauma, Emotion, and Social Connection'*

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Traditionally, Alexander teachers have been reticent to fully engage with the emotional and relational factors that can turn up in the work. Alexander lessons have been viewed relatively simply, as a place where mental and kinaesthetic skills and understanding are passed on in various ways. Recently, however, more teachers have been showing an interest in bringing a greater understanding of emotional and relational matters into their practice. This should be a welcome development. It doesn't make much sense for us to talk about the Self as a psychophysical unity while banishing such central aspects of human experience from what we do.

One of the manifestations of emotional distress most relevant to us as Alexander teachers is trauma. In this article I'll be exploring current understandings of trauma—especially developmental trauma—and how this knowledge is relevant to Alexander teachers today.

For many people, the word 'trauma' is associated with the legacy left by overwhelmingly distressing events—war, serious accidents, sexual abuse etc. But in reality, trauma can arise from a much wider range of events and situations. Technically it refers to any event to which our emotional response is so great that our brain and nervous system is unable to adequately process, integrate and deal with it at the time it's happening. This can include not only rare traumatic events but also more common ones such as shocking relationship breakdown or bereavement, or long-term situations which offend human dignity or deny essential needs and in which a person feels trapped such as living in poverty, being caught in work which fails to fulfil natural expectations of respect and self-determination, or domestic abuse, devaluation and control by a partner.

In addition to these kinds of events in adulthood there is also developmental trauma which happens in the earliest years of life. Young children are particularly susceptible to trauma because they're not able to regulate their own levels of emotional arousal, depending instead on co-regulation from their caregivers. If those caregivers are not able to offer this—especially if there is also abuse or neglect—it's easy for the child's nervous system to become overwhelmed.

We're all born with needs for sustenance, care, love and support, and have a natural expectation that these needs will be met. When they are not it can be experienced by a young child as a fundamental threat to their existence. Contemporary cultures are different to those our system evolved to deal with (Liedloff, 2009) and many socially accepted child-rearing practices are at variance with what a developing child needs and expects. The fear, anger and shame that can occur in response to these factors may be too great to be safely processed and expressed by a young child, and so will often end up stored traumatically in their system instead.

An implication of this for us as Alexander Technique teachers is that quite a high proportion of people who come to us for help will have some level of trauma in their system. As we'll see below, trauma is a partly body-based phenomenon whose effects can be triggered by kinaesthetic and other sense stimuli, including touch. It's therefore particularly important that we have some basic understanding of what trauma is, and of its implications for us as teachers working with hands-on contact.

Effects of Trauma

When we imagine the effects of trauma we may think of post-traumatic stress disorder in which people may have vivid flashbacks, nightmares and constant intrusive reminders of acute traumatic events. But trauma doesn't always manifest in such an overt way. It can also—particularly in the case of developmental trauma—manifest in more subtle ways such as constant low-level anxiety, dissociation, unconscious avoidance of trigger situations, difficulty regulating arousal levels, and fragmented responses and sense of self (Aposhyan, 2004, p. 118). People with early developmental trauma may, among other effects, experience the world as being fundamentally unsafe,

have difficulty in knowing what they are feeling, and feel disdain for emotional displays by others (Heller & LaPierre, 2012, pp.126-131). All of the above may result in difficulty in forming and maintaining productive and deep human relationships.

Brain and Body

There's been a good deal of scientific research into trauma in the last few decades and we now have a reasonable understanding of the processes involved. Essentially, trauma is about *memory*. The body-mind is remembering something that happened, but in a dysfunctional, unhelpful way.

Memory can be divided into two types—explicit and implicit. According to Rothschild (2000, p. 28), explicit memory is:

... what we usually mean when we use the term 'memory' ... comprised of facts, concepts, and ideas. When a person thinks consciously about something and describes it with words—either aloud or in her head—she is using explicit memory.

Implicit memory on the other hand:

...bypasses [language]. It involves procedures and internal states that are automatic. It operates unconsciously, unless made conscious through a bridging to explicit memory that narrates or makes sense of the remembered operation, emotion, sensation, etc. (Ibid. p.30).

Implicit memory includes memories of sense impressions—including of the kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses. When people are in traumatic situations their normal ability to process and make sense of these implicit impressions, and to store the events as explicit memories becomes overwhelmed. As a result the implicit memories (which mostly consists of sensory and kin-aesthetic information) remain unprocessed in the body and brain without being drawn together into a single gestalt that can be filed away as 'past' as normally happens. The different sensory and emotional aspects of the experience remain fragmented, unrelated to the experience, to each other, and to rest of the life of the person. They stay in the mind and body but in a way that—when they come into awareness—makes them feel eternally present. The experience is that this remembered state is happening *now*.

If the emotions attached to these fragments of implicit memory are too difficult or painful for a person to experience, they may be repressed as a

survival mechanism to ensure the individual can continue to function. Because implicit memories are often sensory in nature, and hence experienced in and through the body, this repression may occur through excluding parts of the somatic self from full awareness through muscular tension and holding, a phenomenon that Reich (1990) called 'armouring'. As Fogel (2013, p.196) puts it, 'armouring is a form of suppression that results in the shutting down of sensory receptors and a corresponding lessening of activation in the interoceptive and body schema areas of the brain related to that part of the person'. Repression is particularly prevalent in developmental trauma, because the infant organism needs to project a facade to maintain the approval and love of their caregiver at all costs, lest they are abandoned (the threat of abandonment is experienced as a threat of death by a young child).

Mowat (2008) notes that the repression of emotional material is of particular relevance to Alexander teachers because hands-on work encourages people to let go of muscular holding, which can allow repressed emotions back into consciousness. In addition, because traumatic memory is often based in sensory experience, people can be triggered back into those memories by physical stimuli which correspond to the original event. It's possible that, simply by taking someone into a new alignment or into a movement they wouldn't spontaneously make themselves, we can trigger traumatic material, and there is a danger of re-traumatisation if we are unable to recognise and deal with this appropriately if it happens.

The Impact of Developmental Trauma on Use

One aspect of developmental trauma which we should be aware of is the extent to which it can underly patterns of poor use (Mowat, 2006). Often Alexander teachers look to somewhat later events, such as experiences of school (Dimon, 2015 pp.37-59), blaming the premature introduction of skills for which the child is neuro-developmentally unprepared. While Dimon is certainly right about the potential impact of school, for many children the problem starts a long time before then—and even in the first few moments or weeks of life. For example, if a child doesn't learn implicitly that she's safe, welcome and 'held' by her caregivers—through their presence, attention and calm, self-regulated presence—a fundamental difficulty is likely to develop

with sensing her own body and boundaries and feeling safe in her environment. As Alexander teachers it's convenient to operate from the assumption that the mechanisms underlying good use are always accessible to us through a change in thinking. However, if a person is carrying trauma and repressed emotions, this is not necessarily the case. It's difficult to 'land' fully on the ground, for example, if we feel fundamentally unsafe and unwelcome in the world.

When someone is keeping painful traumatic material at bay through muscular tension this tension will need to release if they are to come fully into the sort of free and easy state which underpins good use. But the person may find it impossible to allow that release if doing so would let difficult and traumatic feelings come into awareness. They may be unable to change at all, or else inhabit a halfway-house where there is a degree of improved use while within that pattern they continue to nurse parts of themselves which are still fiercely held.

The 'Unteachable Student'

It seems to me that developmental trauma often lies behind what some describe as the 'unteachable' student. The tendency to characterise students this way started with F.M. himself, and was taken up by some second-generation teachers who would describe students who had difficulty engaging with the Technique in a very negative fashion—for example this reminiscence from Marjory Barlow:

She [another Alexander teacher] was in terrible distress one day when she came for a lesson. She said 'You know I'm full of guilt because I've had to tell a student that I can't go on teaching them!'. And I said, 'what was the trouble?'

'Well,' she said, 'I didn't seem to be getting anywhere and was absolutely shocked to pieces at the end of the lesson.'

I said, 'You've done the right thing!' and I told her what F.M.. said about the vampires. She burst into tears and flung her arms around my neck and said, 'Thank you, thank you'. It was such a big weight off her mind (Barlow & Davies, 2002).

This is a very unpleasant passage. Though things are hopefully better now, one still hears references from time to time to unteachable students, and I suspect there does remain a latent view among some of us that if a student

can't absorb what we are saying it is because they are incapable or unwilling, or worse. But often it makes more sense to wonder whether the basic conditions of safety are in place for them to learn and, if not, how we might go about improving the situation, rather than labelling them as flawed in some way.

Healing Trauma

In the past, people with trauma were often encouraged in therapy towards the unregulated catharsis of repressed feelings. It was believed that just releasing the feelings and emotions would be sufficient to bring relief. More recently, it's been realised that the situation is often more complex than this.

According to Rothschild (2000, pp. 63–64) the way practitioners respond to such cathartic events has a considerable impact on whether such releases of feeling will be helpful and integrating or not. The memories and feelings need be resolved by being released in a slow, measured way, allowing them to be integrated into the person's explicit, time-based memory structure as would ideally have happened at the time of the original incident. They are then no longer experienced as happening now but as something finished and in the past.

Another danger with over-enthusiastic catharsis is that the person's system may get acutely over-aroused as it did in the original trauma, resulting in re-traumatisation. Because of this it's possible for people to repeatedly cathart the same trauma for years without shifting the underlying pattern. To facilitate real healing it's essential that the process is taken at a steady pace so the person remains fully present, and for a sympathetic adult observer to be available to witness and help them make sense of the material that's arising, allowing the traumatic memory to integrate properly.

A basic level of skill and understanding about this process is essential for anyone who works hands-on with the body in a way that may facilitate the release of traumatic material. This is not to say that Alexander teachers should be trained to deal with matters like complex PTSD. However, dealing safely with the sort of trauma that can come up for many Alexander students in the course of a lesson is well within the bounds of what's possible in three years full-time training. An analogous example is craniosacral therapists,

who are often very skilled indeed in this area, and who gain those skills, alongside others, on trainings that are often shorter than those required to become an Alexander teacher.

Allowing Feeling In

Many Alexander teachers have expressed the view that expressions of feeling in the lesson should be discouraged, and the student sent away to sort them out on their own or with a therapist. Given the relationship between developmental trauma and use, and the possibilities and potential dangers of hands-on work, it's extraordinary to me that, for so many Alexander teachers, there's a spoken or unspoken prohibition against connecting with the student's feelings in a straightforward way and allowing emotion into the room (see also Mowet, 2006). Here's a story which was told to me by a student which I tell here with permission. She was a singer at music college, and was having Alexander lessons on the advice of her singing teacher. During one lesson the teacher was working on encouraging freedom in her ribs when the student felt a wave of emotion:

‘How was that?’, said the teacher.

The student said, ‘I'm feeling a bit emotional’.

‘Really?’ said the teacher, looking a little worried.

‘Yes! I suddenly remembered being in the school choir. The teacher didn't like me. He was a bully and would constantly call me out in front of everyone and encourage them to laugh at me. I became terrified of not being good enough’.

‘Well, teachers in those days weren't very aware were they?’, and the subject was rapidly changed.

The student was left feeling frustrated and upset because she had wanted to cry and knew in her heart that this was what was needed. But she felt her feelings were not only not welcome but were being actively batted away. It was some time before, with another teacher, she was able to access the feeling again and respond the way she had needed to the first time. The difficulty with her breathing, which had eluded her throughout her previous Alexander lessons, resolved soon afterwards.

I believe this story is symptomatic of a more general experience people sometimes have in Alexander lessons. I don't think it's good enough for an ostensibly 'whole-person' approach to personal development in the twenty-first century, which now has so much from science and other mind/body practices to draw on, to be unable to deal with this sort of situation in a more refined, conscious and emotionally aware way. Human beings are not islands, and our feelings are designed to be held expressed and shared *in relationship*. We are not supposed to be sent away from the tribe with our embarrassing, troublesome, dangerous feelings to process them on our own, and the demand we do so encodes a subtle disapproval and rejection of the emotional core of the person which is being evoked by the lesson. When a person expresses a feeling of vulnerability in the presence of someone else there's an innate expectation that it will be met and held appropriately. When this doesn't happen it's at best disappointing and disempowering. At worst, it can be re-traumatising. The demand that the student 'go elsewhere' comes not from what is in the best interest of the student, but from teachers' own discomfort about witnessing other people's feelings, or insecurity around their skills in dealing with them.

Teacher, Therapist or Teacher-Therapist?

It seems to me that the genesis of the Alexander Techniques's emotional attitudes lie in the rather emotionally repressive post-Victorian cultural world in which F.M. and the early teachers lived. In this culture—even among those who were more enlightened, the self-contained, in-control, emotionally detached, preferably male individual was seen as the ideal to which all should aspire. Expressions of feeling were often seen as suspicious. Deviations from this ideal could be ruthlessly suppressed and punished through shaming or cultural exclusion. In so far as the remains of this attitude linger, we are both out of tune with the times we live in and failing to offer our students the full range of help that we can.

Alexander teachers make a strange claim if they say they are engaging in a straightforward teaching relationship while at the same time suggesting they can help people change their relationship to themselves and the world around them, lying them on couches, holding their heads, listening to them

tell their stories, touching, moving, and guiding their bodies, quietening their nervous systems, and (whether consciously or not) facilitating emotional release. Though the Alexander Technique is *primarily* educational, characterising these things as elements of a simple teaching relationship is not an honest, complete assessment of what is going on in these interactions. In holding to such an unrealistic viewpoint we deny our students the full extent of what would be possible if we were to embrace and own the full extent of what we're already doing in a more conscious and considered way.

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