

Multiple Sclerosis and the Alexander Technique

by Jennifer Tweel Kelly

I was introduced to the Alexander Technique more than ten years ago by a dance colleague. It illuminated my perspective on performing and, soon after, on pregnancy. In my young adult life, taking the time and money to investigate the Alexander Technique seemed like a luxury. After being diagnosed with Optic Neuritis and then Relapsing and Remitting Multiple Sclerosis in 2008, I find that living my life through the lens of the Alexander Technique is not a luxury but the most practical choice that I can make.

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic, often disabling disease that attacks the central nervous system. Symptoms may be as mild as numbness in the limbs or as severe as paralysis or loss of vision. When I was diagnosed, I had many questions with hardly any clear answers. I do remember when the doctor told me that stress is often a trigger for episodes or exacerbations, I thought, “Are you kidding me! Life is stressful!” I realized very quickly that I better look at how I am managing the stress.

MS is an autoimmune disease. Essentially, what that means is that the body attacks itself. I was devastated when I learned this. My neurologist told me that his patients do best when they do what makes them fulfilled and full of life. He encouraged me always to take note of what my physical, emotional, and mental limitations are in the moment. Studying the Alexander Technique fulfills both of these concepts for me: It makes me full of life as I am more present and know my “Self” better, and it allows me to understand my limitations. Alexander said that in using the principle of constructive conscious control “we can continue to raise the standard of knowing oneself... this is the surest way of raising the standard of everything else we know and securing satisfactory results in all spheres of learning.”

There are many different treatments for MS and its symptoms: Drugs, physical therapy, diet changes, and acupuncture are primarily recommended. Besides the Technique and some mild diet changes, I am on a very expensive drug that is injected once a week. It took me a while to accept and feel good about consistently injecting medication into my body. Side effects include mild flu-like symptoms. Since it has been shown that the drug reduces the rate of an exacerbation by 30%, I have chosen to take these symptoms as a trade-off. The most challenging thing about the drug is how much it costs.

Comparatively speaking, Alexander lessons do not seem so expensive and luxurious. The lessons often push me up against my edges and challenge me to think differently. Inhibition is so very difficult for me. The process of inhibition, or what I just call “a big pause,” slows down my nervous system. Sometimes it feels, literally, like space is created inside my body. Because MS attacks the nerves, it is no wonder that I feel calmer and more connected when I slow down and have time to respond

instead of react. The space that is created in me leaves more room for clarity instead of clutter and often results in acceptance instead of a fight or flight. As I have looked more carefully in the mirror, so to speak, I find that I live with more acceptance of myself and the moment that I am living in. And if my body is “attacked,” I have conscious control, inhibition, and Alexander’s directions to attend to so that I may be confident that I am doing my best to manage myself well. Alexander Technique teacher Meade Andrews wrote to me that she taught students with MS “to truly use A[lexander]’s dynamic directions over and over to guide their nervous system to assist them in their movements. And the work really calmed their nerves and helped them to think clearly and direct themselves, and it works!”

I recently finished my teacher training at the Alexander Technique Training Course—Charlottesville. I don’t spend time dancing anymore. I have a husband, two kids, and a small business. Change is not only possible but it is inevitable. Reading *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* with my class at school, I was struck by FM’s words introducing conscious control. He wrote, “I trust I may do something to convince thinking men and women that conscious control is essential to man’s satisfactory progress in civilization, and that the properly directed use of such control will enable the individual to stand, sit, walk, breathe, and in fact live with the least possible expenditure of vital energy. This will ensure the highest standard of resistance to disease.” I truly believe this, and I feel empowered by the knowledge and ability to practice changing the things that I actually can control. In Walter Carrington’s conversation with Seán Carey, *Explaining the Alexander Technique*, Carey asks Walter whether there are any muscle wasting or chronic inflammatory medical conditions such as MS or rheumatoid arthritis where the Technique is unable to make a positive contribution. Walter responds, “I wouldn’t say those conditions are a problem... As long as people retain a few of their marbles, there’s always some potential.”



Jennifer Tweel Kelly

Jennifer Tweel Kelly completed her teacher training in 2014 at Alexander Technique Training Center in Charlottesville, Virginia (ATTC-C). She has a BA in Dance from James Madison University and has performed and taught dance in the San Francisco Bay Area. After moving back to Virginia, she collaborated with Zen Monkey Project, where she was introduced to the Technique. She and her husband have two children and own two small businesses in Charlottesville, The Hip Joint, a dance and yoga boutique (www.thehipjoindances.com), and Maya Restaurant (www.maya-restaurant.com).

© 2015 Jennifer Tweel Kelly. All rights reserved.

Photograph by Laurel Thompson.