

Alexander Technique and *Functional Awareness*® *Anatomy in Action*

An Interview with Nancy Wanich Romita given by Brooke Lieb, Director of Teacher Certification at The American Center for the Alexander Technique.

B Lieb: How did you become involved with the Alexander Technique?

N Romita: In 1978, I was a teaching assistant for Marcus Schulkind at the American Dance Festival. Martha Myers (my Connecticut College mentor and ADF Dean) was an innovator in considering somatic models and their relationship to dance training. That summer Missy Vineyard taught a course that was daily for three weeks. I was lucky enough to participate in the class, as it changed my life! I had been in chronic back pain since I was 16. From her group class work I learned that it might be how I was using myself in daily action as well as during dance class training that was part of the issue. This ignited a lifetime curiosity in the work of Alexander Technique. I returned to NYC and worked with Adele Packer during her final term in the ACAT training program, and then with Andrea Hansen. I applied to ACAT in 1981, receiving my training at ACAT with Judy Leibowitz, Deborah Caplan, Barbara Kent, Ann Mathews and others. I graduated in 1984.

B Lieb: What were your early lessons like?

N Romita: It was over 35 years ago, but my memory of the early lessons was of profound relief from my habitual tension patterns, and a curiosity about the notion idea that my *thinking* the directions could facilitate change in my body/mind. It still fascinates me.

B Lieb: Why did you decide to certify as a Teacher?

N Romita: The work had a profound impact on me personally, and I LOVE teaching. I am passionate about the process of facilitating a learning experience in others. I was already teaching dance at the 92nd ST Y and at SUNY Purchase. I was curious as to how these Alexander principles could affect dance training. I also saw private teaching as a way to create my own work schedule around performing and teaching commitments. In some ways I feel it was a calling to teach Alexander Technique.

B Lieb: Tell us about your experiences when you went through training.

N Romita: There were 8 trainees in my group and there were two other cohorts that trained on other days. We had a different teacher and assistant each day. There was a topic each week I believe, and each teacher taught from his or her own perspective and expertise. I found this exhilarating because it allowed me to see several approaches to the core concepts of sensory appreciation, inhibition and direction. It let me then develop into my own manner of teaching because I saw many ways to the same path. Deborah Caplan was straight forward (and up), clear in procedure, and quite funny. She brought a physical therapy perspective underlying her AT practice. Judy Leibowitz had a delightful nature to encourage us to be curious, to explore, to allow one to 'dare to be wrong'. Barbara Kent was infinitely patient and supportive wherever I was in my process. She helped me discover and embody nondoing. I am forever grateful. I also remember squatting and squatting and squatting in private lessons with Ann Mathews... and wondering about whether it would come to anything. Then, one magical day visiting my hometown on a Long Island beach, I bent down to pick a shell and 'just squatted'. Just like that. Aha!

B Lieb: Tell us about how you developed your Teacher Training course.

N Romita: I have been teaching and practicing the Alexander Technique now for 30 years. The guiding principles of awareness, inhibition, direction, means whereby are an integral part of my personal and professional life. I had designed curriculum for courses at the university for years including three different Alexander Technique courses. This seemed like the natural 'next step'. When I started the ATMidatlantic Training Course, I was the only AmSAT trained teacher for many miles and the only one living in Greater Baltimore. The city has a vibrant arts scene, several fine colleges and universities including Johns Hopkins University, as well as a vast series of Hospital systems. Baltimore has an active health and alternative health community. These are all good potential markets for Alexander teachers, but we did not have many.

I teach AT courses at Towson University and have an active private practice. Many of my students expressed interest to train over the years. It seemed like a good time to provide a Baltimore teacher-training program. The program is set up to be small training program with 3-5 people training a time. This allows for tremendous mentorship for the students in their training of AT and it's principles. It allows time to assure that they develop strong communication and teaching skills. It allows our AT community to grow at a rate to easefully sustain professionals in the area. As interest grows, we need more teachers. As we have more teachers, interest increases. It is a good cycle for growth and to spread the word.

B Lieb: What is *Functional Awareness® Anatomy in Action*?

N Romita: Functional Awareness® (FA) is series of explorations in experiential anatomy that heighten our sensory appreciation in order to enhance one's understanding of movement function to facilitate ease in dynamic alignment and effectiveness in body action. And it is fun to learn!

B Lieb: How does Functional Awareness® complement the Alexander Technique?

N Romita: Many people experience tension or pain and assume this is something that "just happens" to them. It is as if the body is a separate entity. People think of joint pain as being like a cold virus: we just pick it up from somewhere. As we know in the Alexander community, often, there is not one particular event to precipitate the discomfort. In FM Alexander's final book *The Universal Constant of Living*, FM states the 'medical men' of his day blame structure for all manner of ailments, yet fail to connect these ailments to function and use. (p 64). His brilliant assessment of this situation, made over 100 years ago, was visionary. The Alexander Technique employs a mindful approach to one's use in action. **Functional Awareness®** offers a deeper understanding of functioning, providing a deeper context for one's use in action. It supports the primary principles of the Alexander Technique.

Functional Awareness® is a tool to enhance context in an AT student's learning framework and provides a functional understanding of the body. It is a process whereby the teacher provides anatomical, neurological or biomechanical concepts to a student in a simple manner, so the student can link the hands on experience of the lesson with a deeper understanding of their own 'use'. Functional Awareness, like 'hands on', provides substantive context to Alexander's principles of inhibition and direction in order to deepen meaningful learning. It does not replace hands on learning, the primary directions, or individual guided instruction. It enhances and buoys the journey of the 'means whereby' and the primary principles of inhibition and directions.

B Lieb: What will participants learn in your workshops?

In workshop 1 participants will learn:

1. The plumb line of standing & its importance in balance in relation to Alexander's principles of inhibition and direction.
2. Exploration of the AO joint, the rectus capitis, & obliquus capitis with the transversospinalis to demonstrate their role in postural support & their support of Alexander's principle of thinking 'up
3. Biomechanical considerations in applying AT principles to gait (walking)
4. An AT table protocol for legs to support the Functional Awareness principles provided throughout the workshop
5. Skills for teaching the material presented for small groups as well as applications for teaching the individual student.

In workshop 2 participants will learn:

Functional Awareness® Anatomy in Action: The action of arms in relation to the torso

1. Biomechanical distinctions of the glenohumeral joint and scapula; an approach to teaching the relationship of arm movements to the primary directions
2. The trapezius, the latissimus dorsi, and pectoralis major, and their connection in Alexander's directions to allow the back to lengthen and widening
3. Chair protocols to integrate functional awareness of the arms with Alexander's principles of inhibition and direction... 'letting the right thing do itself'
4. Table protocols to integrate Functional Awareness® activities with the arms with Alexander's principles of inhibition and direction.