

November 12th 2002 Talk - Cleveland Philosophical Club -

What's Your Position

Position on what? The stock market, your chair, politics, sports, when lying down and tonight - STANDING and SITTING.

I am pleased to be here; at my age I'm pleased to be anywhere. This venerable club has heard some fine talks over the years. David Ford was over a 100 when he said to me one night, "I think I have a couple of more papers in me." I remember Lou Oswalds talk about BOXES, how we were born in a box lived in boxes called houses, etc. and eventually end up in a box. Charlie Hughes and his fine and stalwart talks on everything. He was proud of being a member of the Philosophical Club. I am too.

The New York Philharmonic is another good group. Take the word, Philharmonic. Its derivation comes from Phil...meaning to LOVE or LIKE, harmonics, or MUSIC. Love of music. Philadelphia, is love of brother, or brotherly love. Phil denotes LOVE or LIKE and Philosophy means Love or Like of Wisdom or knowledge. I hope this talk on your Position will add to your feelings of loving or liking attending these meetings to increase you love of wisdom and knowledge.

In 1869 a man named F. Matthias Alexander was born in Tasmania, the eldest of 10 children of an Australian farmer. He became an actor and teacher. He developed a hoarseness' when he performed as a professional reciter and tried all the methods he could find to alleviate to symptom. Doctors prescribed pills, voice teachers told him to project from the gut, not the throat, etc. None of these nostrums helped. He started looking for some cure on his own. He noticed when someone was startled by a loud noise, such as a firecracker or gun shot, they assumed a defensive position with their head, neck and shoulders. They immediately hunched the shoulders and bent the neck and threw the head back. His experiments included taking pictures of subjects hearing an unexpected loud noise and assuming the position of neck bent at the nape , head back with chin out, lower back bent hiking up the lumbar area, tail bone high, upper body supporting everything with legs and knees not involved or gluteus muscles in play. He was observant enough to realize this might be the cause of his vocal chords not sounding clear and in good tone and the strain in the throat area made his delivery on stage a battle for him and his audience. He decided to go the opposite way in his position while reciting and to make subtle changes.

Subtle is the key word in all of this. You can't Make It Happen or Force it. You don't try. You let it happen by an awareness of your position. Improved alignment is the object and improved breathing, easier movement, and for F. M. Alexander, getting rid of the hoarseness. As an actor this was vital to his career. He developed a technique of posture and positioning of the neck and head and buttocks and knees and he summed it all up in a mantra which is said over and over by students of The Alexander Technique. "Let the neck release, to let the head move forward and up to lengthen and widen the back."

He kept looking at his reflection in a mirror when reciting and noticed his position and he could see the strain on his throat muscles and his poor posture.

We have been taught the incorrect idea of posture by seeing pictures of soldiers from WW 1 up to the present, standing stiff at attention, shoulders back and head and back in precisely the incorrect position. Ramrod straight is just not natural and if you tried to emulate that posture when you were young then you know now that it was not a natural feeling. The problem is we become accustomed to the incorrect posture and that position eventually becomes comfortable and the real, proper position becomes difficult. That's why, at first, the position and the mantra seem all wrong but they will, with persistence, eventually become the comfortable and we will be in the correct homo sapiens (wise man) position.

A year old baby usually sits in the proper position. This is natural efficiency of the body's desire to align the neck, back, spinal column properly for overall best functioning. Sadly, the little baby starts imitating the posture of the adults who slouch into the so called "correct position". The imitation becomes "natural" and the trouble begins. The relaxed posture becomes the norm and the breathing, muscle coordination and alignment is not proper. These habits affect our general sensory feedback. The way we use ourselves, our body awareness, and all this has an effect not only on the vocal chords but on everything we do which involves our coordination. The end result is improvement in our posture, thinking, speaking, etc.

John Dewey, the American philosopher, studied the technique for over 35 years and wanted the Alexander Technique to be incorporated in the educational system. Charles Sherrington, the Nobel laureate in physiology, stated of Alexander's work, "Mr. Alexander has done a service to the subject by insistently treating each act as involving the whole integrated individual, the whole psychophysical man." George Bernard Shaw was a student of Alexander and many other celebrates of the time. Classes are presently taught globally. There are video tapes of the Alexander Technique. Some of the older teachers were taught by Alexander himself. F.M. Alexander died in 1955 at 86 years of age. I'll bet he was properly aligned in the box but the point is not how long one lives but how well. He taught thousands the technique, conquered his chronic hoarseness and became a beacon of insight for humans who walk, stand, sit, move. His technique uses no drugs, has no pain. It just becomes natural.

One of the nice parts of the technique is the idea instilled by checking or stopping the action for a split second before completing the action. There is that subtle stop, check, then go ahead that makes the proper position take place with no muscle tension. A fine guitarist and teacher, Jamey Andreas, calls this checking method Posing. Playing with no or very little tension in the shoulders and neck and fingers allows the instrument to be played beautifully. This little stop, or posing, is efficacious not only in playing an instrument but in dealing with people. Pause, pose, just a second, then relax and allow the brain and body to function. Like music, it's a life long process. Incremental improvement is better than perfection postponed and we all have little body, position, and mental misalignments that could use some improvement. Patience is required. Here is a little lyric from a song that involves correcting things in life:

The birds, they sing at break of day.

"Start again", I hear them say.

Don't dwell on what has passed away

Or what is yet to be.

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There's a crack in every thing.

That's how the light gets in.

...Leonard Cohen

Now lets talk about your position and I hope you have enjoyed hearing about something you might not have been familiar with before. Philo, means Love, and Osophy refers to learning. You love learning or you wouldn't be a member of this club. I salute you and your open and thinking mind.

Bill Gordon October 18, 2002