Introducing Frank Ottiwell

by Michael D. Frederick

My connection with Frank Ottiwell goes back to 1969—10 years before I personally met the man. In that year, 1969, Nixon became President, the songs “Come Together” by the Beatles and “Lay Lady Lay” by Bob Dylan blended in our collective consciousness along with the movies *Easy Rider* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and over a half a million people gathered on a 600-acre farm in Woodstock, New York for a music festival that shaped a generation. Vietnam protests were daily headlines on the six o’clock and eleven o’clock news.

At this time of frenetic change, a young Swiss woman named Judy Zellweger (fresh out of the Yale School of Drama) travelled across the United States to San Francisco on the back of her boyfriend’s motorcycle and began having Alexander Technique lessons with Frank Ottiwell. Judy Zellweger later became Lena Frederick, my late wife, Alexander teacher, and dear friend of Frank’s.

Frank and Lena shared two particular qualities over which they bonded: disdain of ignorance in people and a need to be alone and private. (By the way, they both agreed with this assessment and used to talk about it.) If you could handle it—and it wasn’t always easy—what a wonderful mixture to be involved with!

This is what I was introduced to in 1980 when I met Frank through Lena at an Alexander Workshop with Walter and Dilyss Carrington at their master class I organized in Ojai, California. I soon found through hanging out with Frank and Lena that he was a very unusual person. Frank had then and has today a unique quality of combining the authority of wisdom...with a clear sense of “not knowing” in learning. This combination makes a great teacher and mentor—which I recognized—and I quickly attached myself to him.

I soon discovered—and observed as the years passed—that Frank Ottiwell is one of the most seminal and important Alexander teachers in North America. First trained by the great Judy Leibowitz in New York City, he qualified as a teacher in 1959 and then moved to San Francisco in 1967. At that time there were no teachers in San Francisco...or in the state of California. In fact there was no teacher West of the Mississippi River except Marj Barstow in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Talk about the true “pioneer spirit!” These two people, Frank and Marj (initially without knowing each other), forged and put a clear stamp on the Alexander Community in the Western half of the USA. Later on in our little Alexander world, the Mississippi River became our own Mason/Dixon line with our own Alexander Civil War between ACAT-East and ACAT-West, and initially it seemed that ACAT-West lost the good fight.

Or maybe not! Over the years Frank invited Patrick Macdonald, Marj Barstow, Walter and Dilyss Carrington, Marjory Barlow, and Elisabeth Walker to his Alexander Training School based at the American Conservatory Theatre. What an amazing opportunity for his trainees to be exposed to and learn from the “old guard” from England.

It was Frank’s open mind and complete acceptance of all the branches of the “Alexander Tree” that allowed true psychophysical learning to occur. And that is my point: Frank Ottiwell is an honest and true teacher of “psychophysical re-education.” Frank tells you the truth—and especially when you don’t want to hear or see it. He is the “real McCoy,” the “real deal,” as it were. He not only can “talk the talk” (which is easy to hide behind), but also walk the narrow line into true non-doing, psychophysical teaching.

Frank is authentic in his understanding of this work that we all love. Oh yes, there is that word “love.” Behind his slightly disdainful nature and a sense of hiding out in the “corners of the room,” behind all that is a love Frank has for this work and his students. I know, I’ve felt it, and I am sure many of you have also. In those moments when life is falling apart, we would simply phone Frank or go out to tea or coffee with Frank, and he was there in our time of need...supporting our backs—a rare quality and gift to us all.

Michael D. Frederick trained as an Alexander Technique teacher with Walter and Dilyss Carrington in the mid-1970s. He currently teaches in Los Angeles, specializing in working with performers.

AmSAT’s New Mission Statement

To establish the Alexander Technique as a basic and recognized resource for health, productivity, and well-being.

AmSAT’s new mission statement, approved at the 2009 AGM, evolved through a three-year process of AGM discussions, committee work, research, questionnaires, blogs, person-to-person dialogs, written communications, and Board meetings. The Board is grateful to the members of the Mission Statement Committee: Constance Clare-Newman, Erik Bendix, Ron Dennis, Jill Geiger, Priscilla Hunt, Pat McGinnis, Marjean McKenna, and Larry White. We acknowledge Ralph Zito for engaging the membership in the process over the past year. We thank Ron Dennis for beginning the conversation, and for his excellent contribution as wordsmith of the new statement.
by Frank Ottiwell

Periodically I discover for myself all over again what the Alexander Technique is really about—what the point is. I’m having one of those times again. Recently, Jean Clark sent me a copy of a booklet of transcriptions of interviews with a Welsh gentleman by the name of Cliff Lewis, who talks about his life with the Alexander Technique and F.M. Alexander. Towards the end of the transcription, Mr. Lewis recalls that Alexander saw him give his “instructions” one day and said, “For God’s sake, will you stop that. Just go round and stop pulling your head back. Don’t worry about the other things quite so much.”

Mr. Lewis commented: “I don’t think he was regarding the instructions as valueless, but he was telling me ‘Look, that’s what your trouble is. Don’t pull your head back.’ In fact, I find the negative aspect of the instructions more valuable to me than the positive ones. For instance, I say to myself sometimes, ‘Don’t pull your head back.’ And immediately I get a reaction. Sometimes I don’t get that reaction if I say ‘Let the head go forward and up.’ But my teachers say I mustn’t do too much of that sort of thing. I don’t understand that, but I accept their word, of course.”

Reading this, I was reminded of the beautiful simplicity of the work. It has inspired me, as another new beginning, to spend more time not going wrong than in trying to go right. No big news, really—it was, after all, what Alexander kept saying—but Mr. Lewis’ example focused me anew.

I thought I would tell you a little about the four teachers who were the most influential to me to help explain that though these fresh “discoveries” seem to have gone haywire and I turn it off for a moment or two, when I turn it on again it has sorted itself out and is working just fine. The computer in my brain seems to respond to the computer in my body. What’s more, it responds to the computer in my body in a manner that I am not succeeding grows all the time, and that awareness leads me back to stopping.

The lessons were all so fascinating—and felt so good—that I began to wonder about training to teach, and I sent a letter to Ashley Place to inquire. While my letter was on its way, Judy told me that she was going to begin training in Judy’s first class, including Judy, consisted of 13 Jewish women and me. My cultural horizons widened vastly and immediately. For example, I attended lots of YMHA concerts and lectures with Judy and Gladys Lee, who for several summers had gone with Judy to London for lessons with FM. Gladys was a singing
teacher and a great supporter of the Technique. If you wanted to study with her, you had to study the Technique at the same time. One of the things Gladys left me when she died was her desk, and in it I found a packet of letters to her from FM. The letters were mostly about the weather and expressions of his thanks for the food packages she had periodically sent him after his returned to London from America towards the end of the war. He always arranged for Gladys to receive the costs of the hams, tins of butter, etc., from Dutton, his American publisher. There were lots of letters. One of them was particularly interesting to me. Towards the end of it he wrote: “I am pleased to hear that Judy’s teaching is continuing to improve.”

Judy had been partially trained by Lulie Westfeld and finished with Alma Frank, Debbie Caplan’s mother and trainer. This was while FM was still alive and before formal training courses other than his own had been established. What the scenario seems to have been was that Alexander knew about Judy’s work with Lulie and Alma, knew that Judy was teaching and made no objection. Of course, that is not the same thing as having a certificate from FM, but it connects the dots more than I realized at the time. It also helps to explain why the co-founders of ACAT and all other ACAT trained teachers were included, in spite of the objections of some STAT trained teachers living and working in the United States at the time, as NASTAT members and, therefore, as members of what became known as the Affiliated Societies.

I qualified at the end of 1959 and became one of a total of eight Alexander teachers that I knew of in the country. Did I have regrets about not going to London to train? When Gladys got a telegram telling her about FM’s death, I bitterly regretted that I had missed the opportunity of working with him. I vowed never to let opportunities to work with aging teachers of anything I was interested in slip away again.

By the time I got around to making another trip to London, Patrick Macdonald had taken over the teaching rooms at Ashley Place. It was the only address I knew, and it was there I went for lessons with my second Alexander teacher, and the first man I had met who was involved in Alexander’s work.

Patrick Macdonald

I was absolutely bowled over by my first lesson with Macdonald. After the lesson I went for a cup of tea at the Army Navy Stores and wrote with amazement in a little booklet, “I’ve never been so impressed in my life.” This was probably because she didn’t like to set things by labeling them, Marj didn’t speak of inhibition very often, though she was a mistress of it. If one asked her a question, for example, she would pause so completely that sometimes I thought she hadn’t heard. What she was doing, it gradually became clear, was inhibiting a too quick response so that the answer when it came tended to give you the answer you needed rather than the answer you wanted. It was as though the answer came by (“did”) itself!

I said to her once, after a particular morning session: “Marj, doesn’t it drive you crazy to get the same questions over and over?” She paused, looked at me and said, “Oh, I never give myself up.” I wish I could say the same—and I will keep wishing it.

Another time, when she was in her very late 70s, we were talking about her trips to Australia, and I said: “Marj, you should really stop in Hawaii overnight at a hotel and go on to Australia the next day.” “I did that once,” she said. “It was a complete waste of time.” “But,” I said, “is it such a long flight, don’t you find it tiring?” A pause, and then she said, “Oh, I just watch myself.” It is simple, as she would often point out, but not easy.

Her work was transforming, and for many—and certainly for me—the transformation happened in a couple of moments. I found it exhilarating and deeply satisfying as time after time she helped me to feel like the person I always wanted to be. I gradually learned not to judge or second-guess the amount of time stopping should take. My brain/nervous system knows when the time is enough. The solution starts to do itself and a total-pattern movement begins—a movement which is not looked for, a movement which is a surprise every time, but that on reflection is the most natural and appropriate thing to have happen.
I was smitten again, and now I wanted to become Marj. But that didn’t happen either.

**Walter Carrington**

I had my first lesson with Walter in New York in the mid-60s. He and Dilys came to a just-formed ACAT to, as he told me in later years, “bring religion to the heathens.” He said that he was very pleasantly surprised to find that the heathens weren’t so bad after all.

I remember my first lesson with him because I remember how agitated I was as the precious half-hour ticked away while Walter spent the time making sure that we meant the same things when we used certain words and phrases. In the end, he probably saved me years of confusing others by taking those 15 minutes to be clear.

I think the next time we met was after I moved to California and Michael and Lena Frederick brought the Carringtons, Ruth Murray, and Danny Pevsner to Ojai to give a workshop. They invited Pamela Blanc and me to teach along with the British contingent. I think the only thing that kept Pamela and me from thinking we were in over our heads was that Ruth Murray had just qualified, virtually moments before they left England. It was a jolly time.

I experienced Walter’s work differently from anything else I had known. The added value of his work for me is that it made me experience my own strength and presence in space in a way that felt reassuringly opaque and more or less invincible. Apart from his work in lessons, Walter soon became my hero of the spoken and written word. Without his efforts to clarify the work by setting it down in a variety of ways, many of us would be less clear ourselves than we are.

I will just say here that 15 years ago I had a bout with cancer. I hoped it was all taken care of, but about three years ago it came raging back. Once more, I did the necessary treatment and took the wretched medications, but after the treatment was over, I never really felt the same again. It seemed as though, as I approached 80, I was indeed a very, somewhat doddering, senior citizen. Through all of this time the Technique had been more helpful than I can properly express, but still I would stagger sometimes on the street and tire suddenly in a way I hope you never experience.

Then, for the past few months, seemingly out of nowhere, I began to think of Walter. Almost as if I were channeling him, I would come into the present, in full time and space, and begin to feel and move in what I would consider a normal, full-bodied, and substantial way—at least for an old guy who really is about to crack 80.

As much as I always admired and liked Walter, I had never had the passionate response of wanting to be him. But, in a way that I didn’t realize, I must have taken him in in a deeper way, and it is now Walter who is getting me through the day. I know God works in mysterious ways, but without Walter’s methodical patience, dignity, and inspired clarity, I’m not quite sure that I would have found that mysterious way.

Besides those four teachers, Dilys Carrington, Marjory Barlow, and Elisabeth Walker are other teachers who have helped me along the way, and to whom I am grateful. In addition, my close association with the training teachers on the staff of ATI-SF—Rome Earle, Simone Biase, Larry Ball, and Bob Britton—has been invaluable.

Frank Ottiwell began his Alexander Technique studies with Judith Leibowitz in 1954. He attended her first teacher-training course, qualifying as a teacher in 1959. In the early 60s, Frank was one of the five co-founders of ACAT. After moving to California in 1967, he and Judith Stransky founded ACAT West. In 1974, Frank and Giora Pinkas established a teacher-training program in San Francisco under the umbrella of ACAT West. Frank’s move to San Francisco came through an invitation from the American Conservatory Theater to teach the Alexander Technique to the company. He is still at it.

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