The Teachingof Frank Pierce Jones: A Personal Memoir

by Tommy Thompson

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"…for we are not to imagine or suppose but to discover what nature does or may be made to do."

Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*

The Alexandrian has kindly asked me to write a personal memoir on my teacher, and former colleague at Tufts University, Dr. Frank Pierce Jones. I think of this memoir as a footnote to Frank's book, *Body Awareness in Action*, recently republished as *Freedom to Change*. Frank's preference for the book's title shortly before his illness was "*Freedom to Choose*". His publishers no doubt felt that the infinitive left vague exactly what was to be chosen. And, admittedly, Body Awareness in Action is not an altogether misleading title; in fact, it probably attracts more readers than the one discarded. However, it was Frank's recognition of having available to him for the first time the freedom to make choices unencumbered by habit that persuaded him to continue having lessons. Subsequently, his realization of the implications of using that freedom as a means of expanding the whole range of human potential, learning, and interaction led him to teach the work. Had he not realized almost immediately in his lessons with both the Alexander brothers the extent to which his very perception was governed by unconscious patterns of use, perhaps he would never have made such a commitment. Frank likened his condition prior to lessons to the "monkey-trap", the self inflicted predicament brought on by the instinctual refusal to let go, to hold on for dear life to whatever you feel is good for you, even though your motivating desires are principally governed by untrustworthy sensory appreciation.

But the primal life force of self-preservation is deceptively strong, so the monkey sees the fruit inside the bottle, grabs hold of this life-sustaining, pleasure-giving fruit, and thus cannot remove his paw from the bottle of captivity: because he refuses to let go. Absurdly, the bottle defines the perimeters of his perceptive existence. And with no knowledge of how to change his situation, he remains trapped until a way out is discovered. Or else someone else happens by and offers the solution. Clearly, the monkey could use a few lessons from a qualified teacher.

Frank’s illustration was not without application, for daily we find ourselves party and prey to the monkey-trap. And to escape, we can have lesson after lesson in the seemingly never-ending contest with our reactive patterns of unconscious behavior. Although, along the way, at some point Frank thought it was really up to us to accept the full brunt of responsibility for the freedom from habit the work offers us: to go on from there, and solve our own problems. For though we might have little control over the events in our lives, we certainly have control over our experience of those events, our responses to them, and how we allow them to affect us. Once lessons offer the freedom to choose a better course of action than the one habitually taken, we truly encounter the depth of our own commitment, not just to the work, but to ourselves and to those around us.

Frank suggested early in lessons that I make conscious use of my kinesthetic sense, the "muscle sense" that registers tension within the body, and which tells us about changes in tension that accompany physical effort, movement, and variations in our mental and emotional state, to discriminate between what was a constructive level of tension and what was not. He explained that we become accustomed through habit to gauging all our effort and corresponding thoughts and feelings by whatever faulty sensory standard we’ve allowed to occur. Yet, because it is what we know, and it "feels" right, we continue to perform the daily acts of our lives with unnecessary and disproportionate effort and energy. By making the kinesthetic sense reliable, we learn to recognize unwanted patterns of behavior, previously unavailable to individual conscious control. So, I listened with my yet uncharted "muscle sense" while he guided me through lesson after lesson. For a full year, I barely said a word. When at last I did begin to question, invariably I would use myself in such a way that I would disturb the tensional balance of my head and neck which Frank had so skillfully restored two seconds earlier. No better off than the monkey in the bottle, I too, for lack of acceptance of a better way, remained in my own way. Frank’s hands provided the necessary point of reference sufficient to allow me the freedom to reason a more integrative way of continuing to speak. Whether or not I chose to do so, however, was left to me. This availability of choice outside one’s habitual realm of patterned behavior, and what one did with that freedom, intrigued Frank. It intrigued me as well. Still it made no sense to me how he was able to perceive when the directions were present and operable in contrast to my unconscious interference, and whether that condition was in any way responsible for extending the boundaries of my performance. That awareness I thought necessary if one was to trust the absence of what one customarily felt as a legitimate basis for choice.

Frank explained that neither F.M. nor A.R. "showed" him how to "use" his hands. A.R., in fact, remarked that since Frank was fully capable of using himself, he was certainly capable of using his hands. "*But where do I put them?*" quizzed Frank. "*Put them where they’re needed*", replied A.R. Two years into the work, and I seemed to be missing something essential. Frank could not "show" me the answer since apparently one’s hands were "used" in proportion to the depth of one’s own "use". But that was a subjective experience. I had encountered other Alexander teachers whose "use" of their hands enabled them to be skillful at conveying the working mechanism commonly associated with the Technique. Their lives, however, did not appear to be inhibitive of the reactive response, certainly not in the sense F.M. considered essential to understanding his work.

The ball appeared to be in my court. I needed life situations apart from lessons for determining whether there was a measurable difference in my behavior when I allowed the directions to be ongoing in contrast to when I interfered with them. Only then could I trust the absence of what I customarily felt to represent a better condition of use. Alexander anticipated my quandary, writing in *The Universal Constant in Living*, "*This experience of passing from a 'known' to an 'unknown' manner of use of the self is the basic need in making a fundamental change in the control of man's reaction….*"

So I bought a seventeen-foot kayak. And for a period of four months from May through August in 1974, I would paddle several miles out into open ocean from Marblehead harbor, far enough away from land, and into swells large enough so there was always the clear and present reality of not returning safely unless I consistently made demonstrably effective choices. I found when I focused solely on gripping the paddle without being attentive to letting my head and neck retain optimal tensional balance with respect to the torso, that this invariably impeded my ability to sense much movement beyond what I could see. Though, when I had a sense of the presence of my head and neck, and consciously refrained from fixing them in place while I gripped the paddle, I perceived a movement of the ocean much deeper than the visible waves. Inhibiting what "felt" like the right move to make when I had no clear sense of the directional movement beneath me freed me to reason the most appropriate response, among many possible, to that one clear undercurrent of movement that was not likely to change course by the time I determined which direction to initiate with my paddle. That way, I could let pass the lesser force, while taking advantage of the greater, surfacing one. The latter proved time and again to be the measurably more appropriate one.

There were times when I thought myself mad, and I consoled myself thinking if I did join the "*many brave hearts asleep in the deep*", it would be nobody's use but my own that put me there. However, after four months I concurred with Frank, whose notes for the unconcluded fifteenth chapter of his book stated, "*Some people read F.M. Alexander's books or have a few demonstration lessons and are fired with enthusiasm for a vague, general idea of 'non-doing' or 'end-gaining' which they deduce from their experience. Others close their minds to the possibility of a new experience and refuse to see anything in the work but a kind of posture training…. Both interpretations miss the significance of the work completely. You can be wrong about something in a great variety of ways. There are also a great variety of ways in which you can be 'right'. …What is more important to me, however, is the possibility of change in moral and mental attitudes and the extension of the range within which free choice and free will operate.*"

Perhaps it is fitting that when Frank first sanctioned my teaching it was to work with the U.S.A. Olympic Rowing Team. Shortly after the Marblehead experience, Frank encouraged me to carry on his teaching, charging, "*I think you can do it, don't you?*" The choice was clearly mine—only to have made the choice carried with it an ever-widening responsibility.