



## BEYOND THE BODY — BACK TO THE WHOLE PERSON

BY BABETTE LIGHTNER

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How do you imagine yourself? Do you have a body? Are you separate from or connected to the world around you? Are you a mental, physical, emotional, spiritual being? Do you have good or bad posture? How you imagine/understand the way you work impacts all aspects of your life from how you take a step to how and where you seek help when you are in trouble.

We may not explicitly think we have an idea of how we work but our culture and language is imbedded with images of how we function. This implicit image of ourselves and how we relate to the world around us is a primary contributor to the quality of our life. This "functional self image" is so implicit that it is mostly invisible and unquestioned. Yet, it is perhaps one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves, for how we answer it has implications for the fabric of our being. This article tracks a change in my understanding of human functioning and the implications of that change.

Over the past twenty years I have worked with people who have wanted relief from pain and those who have wanted to enhance their performance; people who want to live a good life but a particular symptom was in their way. My students have included everyone from an office worker suffering from neck tension, to a nurse with chronic low back pain, to a singer wanting a freer, fuller sound, to a runner wanting to improve time and stamina. Occupations and symptoms have been broad and wide-ranging. People came to me because I was trained as an Alexander Teacher, an approach aimed at helping people change the underlying habits that might cause or contribute to their symptom.

Years ago, demonstrating to people that their whole body affected their functioning (their pain or performance) was often met with skepticism. But with years of many whole-body approaches inundating the culture there is less and less resistance to this concept, especially in the arts. Most people, to some degree or another, are open to the possibility that their symptom, pain or weakened performance, may have something to do with what is happening in the whole of them, not just the symptomatic part. As someone who spent years wanting to develop this point of view, first as a dancer and later as an Alexander Technique teacher, it is wonderful to be able to start a class or workshop from this different starting place. I owe much to Alexander and other body/mind disciplines for spreading this perspective.

Throughout my years of teaching Alexander Technique I began to feel a nagging disquiet. In my studio or at a class or workshop I could easily bring someone out of pain, help them move with freedom, or improve their sound with voice or instrument. Sometimes the change was permanent. But, more often than I liked to admit, people found it difficult to apply what I was teaching when they were back in the activities of their lives, especially in moments when their attention was on their work. So students sitting at a computer could be easy and free in my studio as they typed but back in the work place they couldn't figure out how they could think about their body, have awareness of their body-use and at the same time think about what they were writing. It was slightly frustrating for them and made them feel like they weren't getting it. For years I explained this to myself with ideas like "Alexander Technique takes time, it's subtle" and so forth. Now I see that in fact they couldn't do both. There was

something inaccurate in the “functional image” on which this and many other “body/mind” disciplines are based.

Even more disconcerting was my work with performers. I taught for ten years in the Professional Actor Training Program at the University of Minnesota, taught classes for the music department there, as well as at a Minneapolis arts center and many other arts institutions. Here again I could quickly help someone out of a tension pattern that underlay her pain or performance problem. I would use my hands to guide her body into a different organization. This is referred to in Alexander Technique as using “hands-on”. It often felt like “wow”, what an amazing change. People felt the change as a sense of lightness or absence of tension, as freedom, power, and confidence. One could get addicted to those “wow” moments.

No matter what I said or cautioned, the power of that feeling was so strong most people wanted it again. So they either kept coming to lots of lessons or they continually fiddled with themselves in ever more subtle ways to recapture that amazing moment. Their attention turned from the music they were playing or the scene they were acting to themselves, with the firm *belief that changing themselves directly would get them not only that great feeling, but also a better performance.*

I teach in an annual weeklong summer voice course in which people often come back year after year. I’ve had the opportunity to observe how people took the initial material and experience away and worked with it on their own. The vast majority of people, no matter how many other ideas and principles they’d been introduced to, came back having spent the intervening years fiddling with their bodies, often becoming stiffer and more self-conscious than ever before. I hated to admit this. I wanted people to experience how beautifully made they were and, of course, sometimes a real change did occur. But the all too common interpretation was, “*Sure I’m beautifully made, but I’m always interfering with that beautiful, inherent design so I’m really a mess and need to fix myself*”. This wasn’t what I was after at all. What was going on?

What saved me to some degree during this time was the “Body Mapping” work of Barbara and Bill

Conable.<sup>1</sup> In this work I could help students get a clearer, more accurate idea/experience of how they were made and there was less misunderstanding and “clean-up” if I kept it at that and didn’t do too much hands-on. So some of the wow “miracle” moments were easily explained and not so mysterious. If a person had believed that her shoulder blades should be held back and in, close to her spine, I could show her that the shoulders were actually made to move. Pain she’d had for years would go away almost instantaneously. A singer who thought she should lift her sternum to enhance breath capacity could be easily shown that contrary to her idea lifting the sternum was actually constricting and limiting her breath. We were updating a faulty image and when that image changed to a more accurate one the change was often permanent.

A distinction became very clear for me. Alexander Technique, Body Mapping, and many other types of bodywork could be very useful when people had wrong ideas (and therefore practice) about how their body worked. If the symptom was caused by an inaccurate self-image a more accurate image solved the actual problem, the cause. But there was a whole slew of issues that seemed at best not addressed well by either approach and at worst exacerbated by them.

I wasn’t sure where to turn, when a friend brought me an article by David Gorman, “*The Rounder We Go, The Stucker We Get*”. In a nutshell this article looked at the circular nature of habit. It showed how, when we perceive a negative feeling we want to change it and, especially if we’ve had some kind of body/mind training, will tend to go into ourselves to direct or fiddle with body parts. This strategy may work temporarily but the circle comes around again because we really never got to the cause of the problem. In subsequent work with Gorman I found the clarity to solve this dilemma that had been nagging me concerning the all too common tendency to be quite helped by a bodywork approach in a particular moment but then enter a new habitual cycle of attention and constant body vigilance. Over time the goal fades from getting out of the symptom to becoming good at “bodywork”, and in the case of Alexander, constantly “inhibiting and directing” one’s self.

The simple idea from Gorman’s many insights that revolutionized my work is that the human system works

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Body Mapping see their main web site at [www.bodymap.org](http://www.bodymap.org).

as one whole coordinated system. By coordination I mean that the generally divided aspects of our system are absolutely integrated. Our mind isn't doing one thing, our feeling another, our skeletal-muscular system another and our biochemistry another. At any given moment our whole system is one living activity in which thought, feeling, structural form, muscle activation, and bio-chemistry are all coordinating together to give us one moment. At any given moment a person is in the *exact/perfect* coordination for whatever he is actually *doing*. "Perfect" in that it is a precisely accurate coordination for a specific intention, not necessary perfect in the way we might think as in "comfortable", "efficient for the task" or "to get the best result". This "coordinating system" works to allow us to do what we want at any given moment. The trick is to discover what we are actually intending in those moments when we *don't like* what has *happened* (the moment of the symptom). As a way of seeing this perspective in action I am going to use two examples. The first is a common scenario when many people find themselves in an unhappy coordination. The second is an example of teaching from this point of view.

The first scenario is somewhat typical and I am making generalizations, not everyone responds in these ways. Imagine someone driving to a meeting glancing at the clock or hearing the time on the radio and suddenly realizing he is going to be late. Instantly he grips the steering wheel, his shoulders go up a bit and his jaw is clenched. He's tight all over in a "stressed out" or "rushed" and "worried" feeling in which his heart rate is increased as chemicals are released through the system. When he becomes aware of this uncomfortable tight feeling he does some self-talk: "relax", "loosen up", "let go of my jaw." Especially if he thinks being tense is a bad thing. Then he remembers he's late and the tension is back in an instant, then he notices the tension and tells himself to relax, he remembers he's late (all the while trying to get to the meeting as fast as possible) and gets tense, he says relax, remembers he's late and gets tense, and an all too common cycle has started. Does this sound at all familiar?

Let's look at this closely. At the moment he thinks he's late he has an instantaneous whole system response that he feels as tension. He didn't volitionally say, "Now I'm going to tighten up". It just *happened*, he didn't *do* it. This difference between what he *did* and what *happened* is a key distinction in the coordinating system point of view. It makes no sense to relax or

loosen up the *symptom*/tension if he didn't *DO* it, because as soon as he goes back to whatever it was he was *doing* at the moment this tension *happened* the tension/symptom would return. If he wasn't *DOING* the "symptom", then what *WAS* he *DOING* at those moments?

That is, if he understood the coordinating system model he would instead, at the moment he notices he's had this tension response, see it as a symptom of something. He is clear that a symptom is the *exact/perfect* coordination of something he is doing. His body isn't being bad to him; he isn't bad because he's tense. From this coordinating system model he can ask a useful question. What is he doing that explains this unpleasant (but appropriate to something) response? Why does it make sense that he is tense? The tension isn't the problem, it is the message of something else.

How does he find what it is a message of? For demonstration sake I'll choose one common cause of this pattern. We need to go back to the moment when he is driving along and not tense, then he is alerted to being late and boom, the tension response happens. If he takes a look at his perspective at that moment and the thoughts that start to spin after he realized he's late. He'll see he was *wishing* he wasn't late. It is logical wish; he doesn't want to be late. In that moment *he is in the perfect coordination of wanting reality to be different from what it is*. He doesn't want to be late and wishes he weren't — talk about a tension-filled moment!

The fact is that he is late. Reality is as it is, pleasant or not. As soon as he can be clear that all he can do is accept the facts of the situation, make a phone call and not get a speeding ticket, he sees that no amount of gripping will get him there faster. As soon as he stops fighting the facts of reality the tension goes away by itself, as does the entire neuro-muscular/bio-chemical response. He doesn't like being late, but he is accepting the facts — he is late. The coordination (feeling) of being late and wishing he weren't late and continuing to wish it, is totally different from the coordination (feeling) of realizing he is late and accepting that not so pleasant reality and then adjusting to it. By the way, "accepting" doesn't mean "liking" it, it is just seeing that facts are as they are and stopping the wishing they were different (as if you could change reality) they were different.

This coordinating system perspective has added benefits. The initial tension response is actually quite

useful; it alerts us to some actions we can take. Once we've done what we can do, then we can simply accept the moment exactly as it is. If this situation occurs often we may want to learn from the situation. The unpleasantness is a great signal inviting us to say, "*Hmm, what would I need to change so I'm not late so much?*" Rather than getting stuck in a cycle of tension and trying to release, we wake up to the tension, use it to alert us to take necessary action, and then accept the way things are. If this situation becomes common we can use the same process to see why it makes sense we find ourselves habitually late. What would need to change? We need to get up earlier, not get distracted or any number of reasons a person might be late. By tying the question to the precise situation we eliminate speculation and false assumptions.

From this perspective our system's tension-biochemical response is a "good" thing. We don't have a messed up, broken body or bad use. We have a wonderfully, responsive system designed to alert us to our misconceptions of our selves and the Universe. The very fact we experience the moment as unpleasant shows us another amazing and under-recognized aspect of our being. We have right within our responses to the world a way to evaluate what is "good" for us and what isn't, our personal inner compass or *value register*. This is an essential subject also opened up by Gorman's insights into human functioning.

I'd like to give an example of applying this coordinating system perspective in teaching, in this case to a singer. A woman is singing and senses tightness in her tone. She notices her whole body is reaching forward, especially from her head, causing a compression in her neck. She senses that this forward tension is affecting her sound. So she tries to keep her neck long or stay back when she sings. At first this may work while she's thinking about the changes and oh what a lovely sound she might get. But as soon as she gets "into" the song or goes to an audition she is back in this tension configuration. She mistook the physical coordination and tension for the cause of the tense tone.

Her body-use, her tension, is just one part of a total moment of coordination that includes the tight sound, her feeling of tension and the forward reach in her head area. This whole coordination is a coordination of something. But of what? Remember the distinction between what a person is *doing* and what *happens* in

them? She didn't *do* the pull forward; some people might call what happened an "unconscious habit". However, from the "coordinating system" point of view it makes absolutely no sense to try to physically change her state of being or her body since she didn't volitionally do it as in "Now I will pull forward, and tighten".

This begs the question: if her forward pulled head is not the actual cause of this particular coordination, what is? Which brings us back to that question: why does it make sense that this is happening? What could she be up to — thinking, intending, reacting — that is coordinated "perfectly" by her system?

As a teacher when we ask this question, we must also ask, who has this information, she or I? This is the key distinction in the teaching situation. She is the only one who knows what she was up to, and it usually takes only a few questions to her to reveal why she was in that coordination. She might be trying to sing well, or wanting others to like her voice, or trying to be loud, or trying to get the feeling across to the audience. There are many possibilities, and with some simple investigative tools,<sup>2</sup> it is not very difficult to find what her actual intention was that would make that tense sound, head-forward coordination happen.

For demonstration's sake let's say she wanted the audience to like her singing. If we look under this for a moment we can see that although it is a common desire she cannot actually ensure their response. In the first place, the whole idea of an "audience" having "a" response is a fallacy. An audience is made up of individual people all of whom will have unique responses. Second of all, responses to her singing are based on each individual's life story. One person may love the song because it was sung to her in her crib, another may hate it because his past lover sang it, another may hate it because she hates the genre. Responses often have very little to do with the singer. The third misconception is that a person's response to the singer says something about the singer. When people assess the song as good or bad they are only telling the singer something about their own criteria.

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<sup>2</sup> *LearningMethods* is an investigative approach developed by David Gorman out of his many insights into the nature of human functioning. See [www.learningmethods.com](http://www.learningmethods.com) for more information. LearningMethods is an extremely direct and powerful set of tools any educator can use to help students see clearly the underlying misperception that interferes with their free functioning.

Even if they say, “*You sang so beautifully*,” they are really only saying that how she sang fit their criteria for beautiful singing. They experienced the “beauty”; the beauty was not a property of the song or the singer. This is very confused in most people’s understanding and hence in their language.

When the singer can see the following three perspectives clearly:

- There is no single audience that will have one response,
- The response to the song happens in the other people based on their personal criteria and their past experience,
- The response or assessment only says something about the person responding and his/her criteria, not about the song or the singer,

her problem will begin to unravel on its own.

Hearing their value assessment, she may learn how the song fits their criteria, which can be useful information, though, crucially, this information always comes after the performance. It is important for the singer to see that she does not have and cannot have that information as she performs. So she cannot possibly ensure a positive response, especially considering the likelihood that some audience members are very likely to have directly opposing criteria.

Once these facts are seen clearly what can the singer do? The desire that others enjoy the song remains true and is a natural enough desire. But all the singer can do is sing the song to her own criteria, which is information that she does have access to through her own responses, her own *value register*. The individuals in the audience will or will not enjoy it, according to their own tastes and their state at the moment. She cannot ensure their response and she’ll only find out afterwards what it was.

If she understand all this, what she can do is this:

- she can focus on the music and allow herself to respond to her own criteria, knowing that this will be what others see as her interpretation;
- she can detect when she starts to sound tense or tries to reach out toward the audience to ensure a positive response from them;
- she can use that detection to come back to her own criteria and her own center.

As she goes about singing this way she will no longer be up to a misconceived intention and consequently

her coordination will be different — more centered, more free and easy — all on its own.

On the other hand, if I, the teacher, thought her pulled-forward head was the problem and believed she could just change that habit I might have brought her attention to her body, whether it was through hands-on work or by showing her the atlanto-occipital joint. She may very well have a “magically freeing” moment. That great feeling would support the idea that her head positioning was the problem and it would then be very logical for her to invite her head to be “free and back” when she sings. She might just start frequently checking her head before and while singing.

But notice something here. If as we saw in the coordinating system example when her head was forward her attention was on what the audience was thinking. When I use my hands or she thinks about her neck she also is no longer thinking about the audience she is thinking about her physical freedom. When her *intention*, and consequently her implicit attention, changes from focusing on the audience to focusing on her neck her coordination *will* change.

However, the problem in this approach is that the free sound isn’t attributed to the change in intention/attention but is attributed to the change in her structure or worse yet, to me the teacher. This strategy can often seem magical to people because if they put their attention on getting a free body they feel so free. They certainly are no longer trying to influence the audience when they are thinking of their body, which is a totally different activity, leading on its own to a different coordination. Yet what they end up stuck with is always having to remember to monitor themselves and make the physical change — they have one more job than they did before, because you can bet they still have the misunderstandings about getting the audience to like them, just now they are trying to have a free body to improve their singing so the audience will like them.

In other words, this getting the body free idea will be reinforced by this approach, and so will another idea. When they operate this way, they end up always finding themselves slightly wrong, in a sense, as if their body will disobey unless they keep checking up and correcting things. Thus a distrust in their own system gets reinforced. At the minimum they won’t have their full attention on the music. At any moment when they do get caught in that unexamined intention to ensure the audience likes



them the “head forward” coordination will return only to be “corrected” again. “*Darn that bad neck habit.*” So the cycle feeds itself.

On the other hand, what *has* been ultimately freeing for people is to help them find the actual misconception that is expressed in their performance and in their structure. Instead of having a body to check and fix, they find themselves a whole, perfectly coordinated person who can put their attention on the music. When a signal arises, whether they hear it in their sound or feel it in their body, they can simply use that either to find another layer of misconception or to remind themselves that they are up to an old habit of thinking and quickly come back to a more accurate relationship to the situation and reality.

When we understand that our symptoms are the way our system alerts us that we are misconceiving something, then it makes no sense to directly change the symptom. In fact, to attempt to do so actually teaches people to interfere with their own personal navigation system. If we shoot the messenger we lose access to the message and to the information we need to find the problem and to be in touch with our real responses to the world around us. If we use the symptom to awaken us in the moment, we can then investigate it or remember what we’ve already discovered about it. There will be no stubborn unconscious habits to worry about over and over and to reprogram, just a small handful of easily found misconceptions to update and quickly clear up.

Many wonderful teachers get at this territory instinctively by asking singers to “*Trust yourself*”, or “*Imagine the audience in underwear*”, or “*Don’t try, do*” or other corrective thoughts. These ideas can save people in a pinch but ultimately they are a bag of tricks that once again has to be remembered to be effective. Since most of the time these are the teacher’s ideas being given to the student, the new thought isn’t really what the student was thinking when the symptoms happened so it does not get to the actual issue and works only temporarily. At best it is overlaid on top of the still-existing problematic ideas.

What this new approach asks is that we get to the cause of a symptom by asking the student, who after all, is the real expert on what he or she is up to. In working with teachers I invite them to notice those moments when they want to advise the student with phrases like “trust yourself”. Instead of saying it aloud, let it alert them to the fact that they are sensing a symptom in the student. And then, ask a question of

the student instead to check out their hunch. The student is the one with information about what they are actually thinking in that exact moment that may be causing the symptom. Simply asking a few questions of the student is often the most useful tool to make a real change.

There are many situations in which human structure and function information is helpful, even critical for change, however, you can be the foremost expert on free body use but as soon as you begin to rush or worry about the audience or what another person is thinking you will find yourself in the un-free but perfect coordination of those thoughts.

Some people have trained themselves to change instantly their symptomatic state of being, to shoot the messenger, because they think that state is not as good as some other state of being. I did this endlessly. I’d be on the lookout for the slightest inefficiency and immediately try to “improve” it. I essentially spent much of my life to some degree thinking about and changing my use or state of being. I was exquisitely trained to go in to feel or check out how I was doing — “am I grounded, free, present?” — as if there was some ideal way to be. Unfortunately, it was almost never here where I was living, though I kept going because I felt I was constantly arriving.

These days I don’t have a body or body/mind or “self” in the common sense of the word. I certainly don’t have an ideal way to be. I am just functioning in the world in all kinds of configurations and coordinations, responses and states of being — free to do what I do and open to be awakened and appropriately responsive when I am off in misconceptions.

I do continue to teach structure and function material, but in a much different, more whole way. This area of my work has also been radically influenced by the new understanding of our human system articulated by Gorman in his *Patterns of Being* workshops and his upcoming book, *Anatomy of Wholeness/Revealing the Obvious* (see footnote below about pre-publication availability of parts of this book)<sup>3</sup>. His pre-sprung elastic suspension system description of human structure and function is the underpinning of the coordinating system model. I

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<sup>3</sup> Extracts of this new book by David Gorman will be available soon in both e-book and print formats. More info about the book and ordering is at [www.learningmethods.com/revealing.htm](http://www.learningmethods.com/revealing.htm)

teach this material under the name *Anatomy of Wholeness*. It too has drastically simplified teaching people about their structure. It comes down to the cooperative process of uncovering and eliminating pre-existing interferences as well as working with whole-person balance mobility, and is less and less a teaching about and changing of body parts/joints. It utterly revolutionizes issues of posture, alignment, breath, emotion, and learning.

After five years of teaching from this new understanding of how we work, employing tools from *LearningMethods* and the *Anatomy of Wholeness* material I can say that people often make simple and permanent changes quite quickly. They no longer come back a few years later still having the symptoms, still chasing the good feeling and still fiddling with their body. Often years of chronic back pain is gone because someone was able to identify his habit of rushing through the day, for example, and stop it when he sees what it causes for him. Or they become free of long-standing chronic tension in performing because they identified the misconceptions they had about making the audience respond, or about trying to be perfect, and stopped trying to do the impossible.

As for me, I personally come back to the question I asked you at the start. How do I imagine myself? I am (we are) always in one dynamic, whole, coordination of being within myself (ourselves) and within the Universe. If I begin to work against the universe or against myself I am designed with an in-built signaling system to wake me up in the moment. My system and my symptoms guide me toward the learning I need to get back to the free, alive, whole being that I am. What could be better than that?

We need look no further than ourselves to see a miracle everyday!

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For ten years she taught in the Professional Actor Training Program at the University of Minnesota. She created human coordination classes for the Music Department at the University of Minnesota and at Macphail Center for the Arts. She was the Artist in Residence for the Theatre Department at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls. Lightner has lectured and taught for many universities, institutions and organizations including the Guthrie Theater, Sister Kenny Institute, Balk Opera Music Institute, Voice Center of Fairview, Taipei National University of Arts in Taiwan. She is on the faculty of the VoiceCare Network. For 18 years Lightner has maintained an individual practice initially as an Alexander Technique Teacher and currently as a LearningMethods teacher. In this practice she works with people dealing with pain, and stress issues and with performers who want to get better at what they do.

Her explorations into human movement have taken her around the world from dancing with a folk dance troupe in the villages of South India to performing with a post-modern physical theatre company in the warehouses of Boston. She is currently one of a handful of teachers pioneering a new paradigm for understanding human structure and function in the *Anatomy of Wholeness™* workshops.

Babette has developed her own movement work called *Wholeness in Motion™*. This innovative approach brings together her range of expertise in movement work including: LearningMethods, Alexander Technique, Yoga, Tai Chi Chuan, Body Mind Centering, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Modern and Ethnic Dance, Mindfulness, and Laban Movement Analysis. She maintains an active workshop and lecture schedule.

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