



## COORDINATION OF BEING – CONDUCTING

BY BABETTE LIGHTNER

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Conducting is dancing. I saw this clearly recently when I asked seventy conductors to conduct the same song at the same time. Suddenly there was a roomful of movers, everyone dancing their unique version of the same piece. Some arms were high and wide and flowing others low and calm and others swaying and bending, the arcs and strengths changing and turning — dancing. Imagine the different sound and song each of these conductors would hear from their version of the piece.

The conundrum of conducting seems woven within this observation. Does a conductor express in herself what she wants to hear? Why do the musicians sound tight? Why aren't they feeling pianissimo here? Why does my back hurt? How the conductor understands the problem she perceives and how she responds determines the effectiveness and sustainability of her solution. One thing that seems to be true is that conductors often communicate information unintentionally that affects their musicians.

I am not a conductor. A conducting friend of mine suggested I be sure to let you know this right up front. This article will not address anything about how to use your gesture to convey specific musical concepts — the vocabulary of conducting, so to speak.

So what am I doing writing a conducting article? Essentially, I know something about two things that can be useful for conductors. I know something about how our bodies work well in healthy movement and what causes unhealthy or harmful movement — for instance, why do you ache between your shoulder blades after a concert?

I also know something about how things we do intentionally cause particular unintentional symptoms. For example, why do your shoulders keep coming up when you keep telling them to go down? Why do you lean forward when you tell yourself to stand balanced on two feet? Why does the choir sound tight when you keep telling them to flow and breathe?

I am a certified Alexander Technique<sup>[1]</sup> Teacher and I also have a lot of dance and movement training. But the core material I present here comes out of the extraordinary work of anatomy maverick David Gorman, author of *The Body Moveable* and *Looking at Ourselves*.<sup>[2]</sup> Gorman took a new, in-depth look at human anatomy from a functional point of view that led him to a new understanding of how we coordinate our actions and what causes the problems people have. There are many ways this information and other recent scientific research challenges much of Alexander's work. So, I can no longer say that what I do is Alexander Technique, although I am certainly informed by what is useful from that body of knowledge. In essence, this article is not about a particular technique. I am simply exploring how some

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Technique has been used by musicians for many years now. There are many resources available on the internet — simply search for: Alexander Technique. The [LearningMethods](#) work is now being taught in many music and theatre schools and conservatories in Europe and North America.

<sup>2</sup> *The Body Moveable* by David Gorman is a 600-page illustrated musculo-skeletal anatomy reference book. *Looking at Ourselves* is a 123-page collection of articles and essays. Both are available [online through LearningMethods Publications](#).

aspects of our current structural and functional knowledge about our human system, its balance and mobility, can enhance your skills and the pleasure you find in your conducting.

There are two basic facts that underlie this change in approach from the traditional postural model and even the newer body/mind approaches like Alexander Technique.

First, anatomically and functionally we are not built to operate in positions. We can't hold a posture or try to get in "alignment" and still function efficiently. Optimal functioning is based on an interplay between stability and mobility, all naturally coordinated and integrated by our attention and intention on the activities in which we are involved. This interplay is more accurately represented by a model of an elastically sprung web of suspension, a sort of tensegrity structure for those of you who know Buckminster Fuller.<sup>[3]</sup>

Second, there is no functional separation between body/mind/emotion. You cannot give your body a physical instruction that it will maintain, as if it is something separate from you, while you go on paying attention to something else or experiencing myriad thoughts and feelings. In other words, you only have one attention.<sup>[4]</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The pre-sprung elastic suspension system model of human structure is articulated by Gorman in his *Patterns of Being* workshops. He originally wrote about this in a series of articles in the early 1980's called *In Our Own Image* (included in his *Looking at Ourselves* book) and currently is writing a book about this system and its implications. Essentially, the model shows how it is our active, aware opening to the world around us and to the support of the earth that elicits an interplay between gravity and our structure that activates us into an entire web of tensional support which springs us into our dynamic, responsive, mobile uprightiness. While Gorman's model is definitely built on the up-to-date scientific facts of our musculo-skeletal structure combined with its molecular neuro-muscular activation and coordination, he has added a profound new level of insight by looking at it all from the point-of-view of the whole, thinking, choosing, responding person.

<sup>4</sup> Here is a wonderful articulation about attention by David Gorman (*from a workshop, August 2002*):

"It often happens that we innocently try to do two things at once, for example, a violinist needs to be paying attention to the actual music she wants to play yet also tries to attend to controlling her fingering on the strings, or an archer knows he should be paying attention to the target but tries to also pay

While these two perspectives are familiar to many people conceptually, i.e. in an "intellectual" sense, they continue to use language and operate from a pedagogy about body that does not reflect these concepts. As soon as a direct physical instruction is

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attention to controlling his breathing. They are both caught in one of the most common fallacies — that we have more than one attention and hence can pay attention to more than one thing at once. This illusion arises because what people are doing when they think they are paying attention to several things at once is instead to be quickly switching back and forth, but so subtly that they usually do not realize.

This ability to quickly shift focus is very helpful in certain circumstances, but when people mistake this as if they have multiple attentions they can be led into unconstructive habits. In the cases above the misconception is that they know their main focus or "primary" attention should be on the music or the target. They think they have indeed directed it there and "left it running" while they bring a secondary focus onto the details of the fingering or the breathing. That this is an illusion is easy to show, for when we help them to really stay with their main focus and resist the temptation to go off to the other details, they not only register how different that is and how much more present they are with their goal, but their functional coordinations are better and the resulting music or archery is also much better. Somehow the system took care of the details when they got out of its way and simply stayed clear about and focused on the goal. You, the conscious attentive being, are the boss and you need to lead. How can the ship function unless the captain is up on the bridge steering where he wants to go — if he goes below-decks to tell the workers exactly how to shovel coal, who is up on the bridge leading?

Another aspect of the problems that can arise from this illusion is when people say, "I wasn't present", or "I couldn't concentrate" as if there is a state called "not being present" or "not concentrating". When we look closely it turns out that they were in fact present, just not with the task at hand. Rather they had been distracted and were present with something else, maybe their feelings of nervousness or their thoughts of how to do their techniques, or thoughts about how well they were doing or what others were thinking, etc. Once a person realizes that she has only one attention and if it wasn't directed where it should be it must have been placed elsewhere, she is on the first steps toward being aware of what she is aware of, then she will be able to consciously perceive her attention shifts and to recognize what thoughts, feelings or emotions have dragged her away from what she intended to do. Only then can real understanding of what is happening and real choice and control become possible again."

given, like “take a deep breath”, “relax”, “release your shoulders”, we are back into an erroneous approach to ourselves and to our students.

What do we do? We need to develop a new language, a more accurate perception and an exploratory pedagogy that truly reflect the facts of our coordinating system. How would this work? Let’s take an example. A conductor is standing talking to the choir. We see an alert, open, mobile person who is breathing freely, who is balanced and engaged. The conductor looks at the clock and turns to the choir and says, “OK, time to rehearse.” Now we see the conductor standing behind the music stand, baton in raised hand, and an overall sense of holding permeates her. Her chest is raised. There is very little breathing except for a few forced take-a-breath kind of breaths. She is forward on her toes, eyebrows raised. She is ready to start in a lifted, held, leaning-forward sort of way.

What is going on here? If we were to help this person from the postural or body/mind separated approach we might tell her to relax or come back over her feet or release her elbow and breathe. If, on the other hand, we come from the “whole-being as a coordinating-system” point of view we start with a question to ourselves. The coordinating system perspective implies that we are already beautifully designed for efficient action. If someone is in a seemingly inefficient coordination for what they want to do then we first must ask ourselves why would their system be in this current coordination — in other words, not what we can do to fix it, but why is it happening in the first place?

Let’s come back to our conductor. We know she wants to feel free and balanced as she conducts (she already told us). Yet as soon as she starts to conduct, even in that first preparatory stillness, she has lost her freedom and balance. If we stop her and ask her about this she may not even notice that she is stiffer. To help her notice, we could create a moment of comparison by having her replay how she is when she is just talking to the choir and then compare it with the very next moment of starting. She then may say, “Yes, I can feel I am forward on my toes and not breathing. But, I feel ready. When I am just talking to the choir I don’t feel ready yet.”

Now, we ask, “Feel ready? Ready for what?”

“Ready to conduct”, she replies. What we are doing is sleuthing out what she is doing, what she is intending and what she is thinking at the moment she turns to

the choir. In this case, what she intends and what she feels she is doing is becoming “ready” to conduct. As we continue to ask a few questions it becomes clear that her idea of ready has two parts. One is her conducting and singing training in which she was told to lift her sternum or stand straight (“good posture” territory). The other is her desire to connect with the choir.

We’ll take one aspect of the situation at a time.

First, we discover her stand-straight postural habit is so ingrained that she no longer has to think “stand straight”. She, in a sense, becomes a conductor by taking on this lifted holding. We would then have her look closely at her resulting experience to accurately assess if her idea of good posture is actually giving her the freedom and balance she wants. One simple experiment so that she could begin to experience the holding and effortful part of her habit would be to have her start to conduct as if she was just talking with her choir; for her to go about it as if she wasn’t a conductor. She would compare her “conductor” posture with her “just being herself” way and assess the relative mobility and balance in each. This would probably be an appropriate time to introduce some of the principles about her structure, about her elastic suspension and dynamic balance, and about supported movement. So rather than telling her a new and “better” way to position herself or free herself (relax), we are helping her discover her already-existing free and upright nature.<sup>5</sup> As she stops imposing her conductor posture she will be able to assess for herself which approach actually allows her to be ready. In this way “ready” will get redefined as she sees it includes mobility, ease, and support. In the same way “posture” will be redefined as she experiences her imposed holding and how it impedes her freedom.

In fact, by the time we get to this point, we have what we need to be able to take the next step to help her discover how posture interferes with the freedom in her choir’s sound as well.

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<sup>5</sup> I am not going into the detail of how to re-educate this conductor about the suspension system at this point. It would demand an article of its own. Leave it to say the approach is radically different than most experiential anatomy and does not leave a person attending to ways to make their body better by directly becoming more aware of body parts and so forth.

Remember, that other aspect of her “ready” was her desire to connect with her choir. As soon as she wants to connect she leans over into them. That pull forward with raised eyebrows is how her system coordinates her deep intention to connect. People often refer to this kind of pattern as doing too much or getting in our own way.

However, it is important to see clearly that this is not quite what is happening here. She is not pulling herself off balance and tightening her face the way she had consciously trained herself to lift her chest. The leaning forward, in a simplistic sense, is her unconscious whole-body response to her desire to connect with the choir. It is as if her attention flies out of her into them. If we asked her where is her attention at the moment of “connecting” we would see that she has all her awareness way over in the singers.

There is nothing wrong with her body, no bad “body use”. What is happening as she does this is that her system perfectly coordinates her into the shape and posture of someone who is trying to connect by narrowing their attention out and into the choir. She is, in fact, in the “perfect coordination” for this kind of connecting.

If she wants to change this habit what does she do? The old way might be to say, “Do less, relax, stay over your feet or lean back”. This correction may be useful temporarily but generally leads to a whole new clutch of problems and an ongoing series of further corrections. The problem or cause of the leaning forward strain does not lie in her body or her posture, it lies in her understanding of connection with the choir. If we can take that apart and see clearly what is necessary for the act of conducting she will find a real and permanent solution.

What does she mean by connecting with her choir? She wants the choir to know she cares. She wants them to know she is ready. She wants them to be energized and ready. She wants to make sure they come in to the music on time. She wants essentially to communicate multiple messages in that first moment. So we dig a little with more questions. How does a choir know their conductor cares? How do they know she’s ready? How do they get energized and ready or come in on time? If she answers each of these questions in turn and specifically it won’t be long before it becomes clear that leaning forward and raising her eyebrows has little to do with achieving any of these specifics.

First and foremost, connection is already occurring just by the mere act of being in the same vicinity. We see and we hear. Humans are innately and automatically perceiving and communicating creatures. She doesn’t have to narrow her attention over into them to be seen or heard or to “connect”. If she simply is there in the role of conductor, looking and listening, that’s all she needs to do. Her attentiveness will be visible without having to show it. Their attention will follow.

This applies to “caring” too. She doesn’t have to show she cares. If she cares it will be expressed and perceived without any added expression that she cares. As we see in her habit she shows much more than ready when she leans and intensifies her face. Typically the choir will stiffen in response to being readied by this kind of conductor.

But this is not enough to change her pattern completely. We already learned that part of what she means by wanting to connect is that she wants to make sure the choir comes in together and on time. She wants control of the choir.

Ah, but can she actually “control” them? It is helpful to be clear of what she is in control of and what she is not. A conductor can control her own movement, her own understanding and what she teaches or prepares. In other words, she can control herself. The choir will or won’t come along. She can not control them from behind the stand or make sure they do something.

She CAN be clear. She CAN guide and lead them. That’s the chance she takes in this profession. This may seem terrifying to her. “I’m a control freak”, she shouts. But if she goes one step further and looks closely, she’ll see that she doesn’t really NEED to control them. Is it a 50/50 chance they’ll come in or 95% chance they will? If she simply recognizes that the chances are quite good they will come in on time — after all, this is what they want too — she will see that it is more a question of trust than of control. Trust, plus the easy and unforced clarity of her lead and guidance, will do more to bring about the result she wants than any tension and trying on her part.

Accurate and specific assessment of how things already work, as well as making peace with and accepting the facts as they are will help her step out of the whole trap of worrying or trying to control what is out of her control.

At first exposure to this exploring, questioning and discovering approach some feel like this sort of

analysis takes too much time, is too complicated. But if we look at the hour or two it takes and then take in the new level of understanding and the profound and permanent results, we can see that the time is well spent and ultimately saves much more time and suffering.

Our conductor is now experimenting with not positioning herself, just allowing herself to be, as she is at this moment, with no need to change anything, simply because this moment is as it is. She also has cleared up misconceptions about connecting with and controlling her choir. So this next time as she turns to begin the rehearsal, she remains in her innate, effortless, balanced and supported coordination to conduct the choir! She can now put her attention on the music and guide her choir from her own center rather than be over in them trying to control them or inside herself trying to fix or direct her body.

When she can operate this way, she will find that she now has access to the enormous wealth of information available to her from her own system. This is the marvelous by-product of following this coordinating system perspective. A person simply goes about living life and when something is amiss their very own system wakes them up with a signal (usually with a symptom of some kind). Then they can begin the journey of exploring and discovering the cause of the signal or symptom and changing it. End of problem. Beginning of more knowledge and understanding. Plus they don't have to get stuck in the vicious cycle of symptom, adjustment, another symptom, more adjustment, where there is an endless series of more sophisticated and subtle, though usually temporary, attunements.

This conductor example has many tributaries of interesting implications into which we could paddle. But I am choosing to stick to the main points for demonstration purposes. Yes, as you listened to me work through this piece of work you may have thought of other explanations or had other responses to questions. You may have noticed other possible misconceptions. After all, there are almost as many responses as there are people and here we have just followed the path of one of them.

Sorting out misconceptions is the heart of much of this work. The unraveling begins to almost do itself once you start to work from this different point of view. This is the point of view of a whole-being coordinating system rather than a separate body and mind or even an integrated body/mind/spirit/emotion model. We

are one being, a coordinating being, who is always in the perfect coordination to how we frame this particular moment. From this point of view, it makes no sense to make a direct change in your body (relax your shoulders) or a change in your feelings (calm down). Instead, what makes sense is to look closely, and through learning a new understanding comes and your framework changes. Your beautiful system and its functioning follows. As a bonus, this kind of change is much more integrated, complete and connected to the activity at hand than body/feeling directed changes.

The postural body-directed approach often masks the signals you get because you changed the symptom before you've even learned its significance — you shot the messenger. If you relax your shoulders or direct them to widen, you'll miss the message that tight shoulders are the perfect coordination of something. But of what?

With the coordinating system approach, you simply let the message wake you up and you notice, "Hey, my shoulders hurt. I don't like this feeling. Maybe something is happening that is not good for me." Then you take the next step to explore what the message means: "Hmm? I wonder what I'm up to that is causing this feeling of tight shoulders?" In this way you are acknowledging there is nothing wrong with your shoulders or your body even though you hurt. In fact, the messenger is there to give you an important opportunity to learn.

There is no such thing as bad body use. The wrongness, the problem lies somewhere else. As you take a moment to reflect and explore you will discover what and where. For instance, you may discover you were worrying about whether or not your performance would be good and imagining a negative outcome. Shoulders tighten when you worry and anticipate the negative. When you are in touch enough with your own system so the symptoms guide you to look with greater clarity at the situations and correlate them with your thoughts, you not only have the key to being permanently free of specific symptoms, you have the key to learning about yourself and ultimately great freedom.

In my experience with this approach results are quicker, more permanent and liberating in the largest sense of the word. Having spent years believing the previous work I was doing was coming from a whole person perspective yet constantly bumping up against contradictions, this new point of view is a great relief.

When any new approach brings greater clarity of explanation and easier application, when it is simpler, more powerful and without apparent contradictions it would indicate we have found a more accurate direction, closer to the way we function. If we are lucky, the work will continue to grow more and deepen as we learn even more.

As I said in the introduction this articulation of the coordinating system is the work of David Gorman. In the many years he has been exploring and working from this perspective he evolved an approach to help people quickly and effectively sort through misconceptions and misperceptions. His work starts at the level of the symptom, the wake-up call, working specifically from the particular moment when the symptom occurs in order first to make sense of what is happening to find the cause of the problem and only then changing that cause.

The coordinating system model is a description of how we work, of our inherent nature as whole integrated human beings. In that sense, this approach which Gorman has called LearningMethods isn't so much a system or a technique as it is a set of methods of... well... learning. Learning how to more accurately understand our system in this new way and allow ourselves to function accordingly.

The hallmark of this approach is that he is always teaching you how to use your own intelligence and your own awareness to make sense of the problem and gain more knowledge of yourself. Many mindfulness and bodywork approaches talk about awareness but LearningMethods is the tool kit for the most direct and practical way to be aware, showing you exactly where to look and how to sort it out. LearningMethods classes are more than sessions helping you to solve specific troubles — they hand the tools over to you and teach you how to solve your own problems.

Go to [learningmethods.com](http://learningmethods.com) for more information about David Gorman's discoveries and work. Go to [stonesinwater.com](http://stonesinwater.com) for more information about Babette's work, or contact her via e-mail at: [babette@stonesinwater.com](mailto:babette@stonesinwater.com) (other contact details are on her web site).

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Teachers in the United States. 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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