

Articles

EVENING STANDARD 18TH May 2004

The Power of Posture by Michael Bloch

As a studious boy, I used to walk to school carrying a heavy bag of books. As a result, I reached adulthood with my right shoulder almost an inch lower than the left. I imagined this to be a permanent deformity, was rather self-conscious about it and had my jackets specially made to hide the discrepancy.

But in 1991, when I was 37, I began - with some scepticism and for reasons quite unrelated to my shoulder problem - to learn how to walk again.

More specifically, I started taking weekly lessons in the Alexander Technique. Within a couple of months, the shoulders had levelled out and a myriad of health problems I suffered from began, somewhat mysteriously, to resolve itself. Indeed, they were the types of problems most of us suffer from, but few realise stem from our posture.

So yesterday's report giving people the idea that back pain and spinal problems are figments of our imaginations leaves me a little disheartened. I'm proof that understanding how posture affects the spine can transform one's life.

The Alexander Technique is not easy to describe; it needs to be experienced. Its purpose is to help us identify and overcome the bad habits in posture which most of us develop, and which account for much that goes wrong with us. We are usually unaware of these habits - the way we sit, stand and walk - for what we are familiar with feels right, even though it is often wrong.

The Technique helps us distinguish the difference. It trains us to stop doing the wrong - then the correct posture happens by itself.

As it claims to be a form of training rather than therapy, its practitioners describe themselves as "teachers", offering "lessons" to "pupils". A lesson normally lasts about 40 minutes, and consists of two parts. First, the pupil is gently manipulated on a massage table: this resembles a form of physiotherapy, though the object is not so much to make the pupil feel better (though it generally does), as to "educate" him or her in matters of muscular sensation and postural direction. Secondly, the pupil is taught the correct way of sitting down in and getting out of a chair - the important elements of posture are summarised in those two acts.

When I encountered the Technique 13 years ago, I had written five books, which had brought me some fame and fortune. I had many friends, and much to look forward to. Yet I was plagued by colds, I often found myself short of breath, had digestive problems and was prostrated by allergies.

I had always been a rather awkward and malco-ordinated individual, but imagined I would improve with time, whereas the opposite seemed to be the case. As a result, I frequently felt exhausted or depressed. The many doctors and specialists I saw provided little help.

One day, a drama student friend remarked that I was a complete wreck and suggested that I took lessons with his drama school's Alexander teacher, Robert Macdonald. (Since the 1970s, the Alexander Technique has been standard training for actors in the UK.) I reluctantly signed up for a few lessons.

Although I only took a weekly lesson, thought to be the minimum needed for a beginner to benefit significantly, the surprise rectification of my shoulder imbalance proved to be just the first of many results. I soon experienced a dramatic improvement in my general functioning and have rarely since suffered from colds or indigestion.

My allergic and respiratory troubles did not vanish, but henceforth troubled me far less, clearly because their effects were aggravated by habitual faults in my posture. It has also brought me psychological benefits, instilling a calmer approach to life and thought. These changes were remarked on by others: one even said I was virtually unrecognisable.

I have always been somewhat indolent and therefore was pleased to hear from Robert Macdonald that, if one suffers from faulty posture, it is important to avoid planned exercise, which can only accentuate the faults. His first advice to me was to give up the gym, where my problems were certainly being compounded. The Technique has taught me the correct and natural way to walk - taking short strides, which help one maintain upright posture.

Looking back, it seems extraordinary how little time and effort was involved in bringing about these radical changes. After a couple of years (by which time I felt a new man), my weekly lessons became monthly lessons.

Only about three years ago, when I started work on my biography of the Technique's founder, Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955), did I embark on an intensive course, taking two or three lessons a week so as better to understand what I was writing about. In addition I experienced further improvements in functioning. As a result, I now feel rather fitter at 50 than I did at 40.

Alexander made a fortune in London and New York with his unique posture theories. His followers included actor Sir Henry Irving, novelist Aldous Huxley and politician Sir Stafford Cripps.

When Alexander arrived in London 100 years ago, his technique was only for the rich: a half-hour lesson with him cost the equivalent of £250 today. For a fraction of that sum, anyone can now have this beneficial and enjoyable experience. I cannot recommend it too highly.

FM - The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander by Michael Bloch (Little Brown, £12.99).