

WALTER CARRINGTON - FRIEND OF ALL THE WORLD
MAY 4, 1915 - AUGUST 7, 2005

No, we cannot feel wholly sad about losing this one. If he taught us anything, it was the usefulness of putting a positive spin on things. Of course he was an exceptional exponent of Alexander's work. His marvelously spread hands, gentle as babies', packing the punch of a boxer's, were like none others in their capacity to blast away the normal collation of base desires and trivial concerns constituting one's mood. Warmth and laughter would course through you, enlarging your narrow internal world as your back lengthened and widened with fresh prospects. But it was his extraordinary tolerance of the human condition that pitched him into a more saintly realm. "Hallo, my dear, how simply lovely to see you!" became a sort of catch-cry experience as we were drenched over and over in the unflagging generosity and sincerity of his welcome. Good co-ordination and a singular lack of personality disorder seemed to have combined in this man to produce a deeply calming presence.

Born at the outbreak of the First World War - the one that was supposed to end them all - in 1914, only to be called upon to spend the first six years of his voteable manhood flying around Europe throughout the Second, would have been enough to make anyone who had experienced such self-destructive lunacy choose negotiation as an alternative to the perpetuation of MAD. Whether by nature or conscious decision, he grew to become everybody's friend. He is the one from amongst our golden oldies who, when asked on a video what he thought about the state of the Alexander Technique today, so memorably replied that he felt our differences were fewer than our common aims. Since our shared objective is to earn a living teaching the Alexander Technique, the comment was irrefutable, leaving us with nothing further to do but get on with it! We bickering normals had been subtly disarmed.

At times, some players were a little rattled by what they perceived in him as a Micawberish tendency. They wanted him to take more of a stand against, for instance, the depredations of a business-speke mentation upon the nobility of F. Matthias Alexander's contribution to human lore. Yet somehow he managed to endorse each individual's efforts to protect the work from debasement. It was just that he wouldn't join in the fray and call the others a bunch of shits.

I suppose he'd seen enough of that during the first half of the twentieth century over parts of Germany and Italy. Was it as an alternative to that mayhem, perhaps, that he seized the means in Alexander's Indirect Method of developing a quite remarkable gift for diplomacy. Back in the 1960s, on a grey morning while he worked on me, I was watching a fellow-student taking someone's head on the table. Her wrists were fixed, her eyes stared as she strained to 'think up', while her own head was yanked firmly back and down by her tight front. In exasperation at her pathetic performance, my feelings surely compounded by the question as to whether I'd do any better myself, I let off a bit of steam in a general sort of way. "People," I spluttered, "are so bad at this!" I didn't expect an answer exactly. But as usual, Wally was there for me; and after pondering and noting what I saw, he responded with, "Yes, my dear, you're quite right," - gently, kindly, acknowledging my perception. Then - thereby so skillfully obviating any negation of the other person's struggle, while simultaneously assuaging my beginner's frustration - he added, "But they are getting better."

For this man, the humanitarian consideration seemed always to take priority over the business of being right. And so did the consideration of bottom lines, cores, all those when-the-chips-are-down fundamental things that you want most to get to happen. When his own patience was tried, he'd work on a solution to the problem rather than use the opportunity to exercise a pompous authority. In those early days as the training course was burgeoning with great numbers of us, he would start the session with a half-hour talk about the work, during which we students would arrive, one at a time, punctuating each sentence of his chat or his reading with a shriek of the doorbell. This was pretty irritating, and we who'd arrived on time would sit there fuelling our righteous annoyance with bring-'em-on fantasies. But, perhaps to our disappointment, Walter simply moved the talk time half an hour forward, with the request that those who came even later should wait until after the session in a room downstairs.

When even that manoeuvre didn't solve the problem - naturally, nobody wanted to sit alone missing the precious words, so each would creep into the room hoping not to be noticed in spite of having had to ring the doorbell anyway - perhaps he decided that the problem might as well be ignored. While our heads turned to glare at each entrant, he would calmly continue reading and talking, showing us how to not react. That's what he did mostly. He showed us. Years later when I told him how frustrated I was with one of my own trainees who didn't seem to be taking on board what I'd been battling to impart, he so gracefully lifted me off my hook with, "Well, my dear, one can only show them".

He stuck with what was relevant and therefore dealt with the important things. I had an early lesson in common sense from him when my first pupil asked me for coffee. The young man was handsome, I was excited, so the scary issue of 'professional behaviour' loomed. I asked Walter whether I'd disgrace the Alexander establishment by going out with my pupils. "No, my dear....I don't see why that would be so....", he replied, pondering. Then came the master-stroke of perspective: "You will only bring disgrace on the Alexander establishment if you give bad Alexander lessons." Which, under the circumstances, of course I did.

He was having a giggle, but also meant it when he told us we mustn't mind our mistakes. "Life would be no fun at all if we weren't wrong," he said. "It would be game, set and match without having had the fun of playing!" And was our great teacher intentionally droll when he asked me whether I could throw any light on why an applicant had been turned away from another training school on account of his being homosexual: "Now, I wouldn't have thought that had an awful lot to do with it, would you my dear?"

So we are sad, and somehow also glad - of the richness of having bathed in this man's beaming aura for such a long span. Yes, my dears, we have lost a good one; but there will be other good ones powering along in the pipeline. We must just go on. Yes, my dear.....

By Christine Ackers