**Alexander Audio - Robert Rickover**

**Marjorie Barstow's teaching - 6**

**Guest: Franis Engel** ([www.franis.org](http://www.franis.org))

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**RR**: Hello, this is Robert Rickover at Alexander Audio, and today my guest is Franis Engel, who is an Alexander Technique teacher in Waimea, on the Big Island of Hawaii, and Franis, like myself, studied extensively with the late Marjorie Barstow of Lincoln, Nebraska who was the first person to graduate from F. Mathias Alexander's first training course. So we're going to talk today about our experience with Marj and how her work fits in, differs or maybe is the same as some other approaches to the Alexander Technique. Franis, welcome to the show!

**FE**: Thanks, Robert, I'm glad to be here.

**RR**: Well, Franis, I'm glad to have you here and I wonder if you could maybe share your first impression of Marj.

**FE**: Well, I heard about Marj long before I met her, because I was partners with a guy who was in a training course who used to invite master teachers over to meet them and take over the course for a while. This was at Frank Ottiwell and Giora Pinkas' course they had started called ACAT in San Francisco in the mid-1970s.

**RR**: Ancient Alexander history, hah?

**FE**: And in that era, what was interesting about that era that's very different from now is that no one besides Alexander himself had written books about Alexander Technique, exactly what it was and how it worked, and what its principles were, because pretty much it was taught hands-on, the teacher even chatted while they were teaching you thinking that what you had to say had nothing to do with what you were really learning underneath what you were talking about. And I think that Marjorie Barstow was the first person, the first teacher who saw that the way people talked about something had something to do with the way they were responding and learning. So she was one of the first teachers to integrate talking about the Alexander Technique while it was happening. She would encourage people to say something about what they were experiencing which was unusual in that era.

**RR**: Mmh, and acutally when you talk about that it reminds me of when I was in England in the late 80s, I think it was the second international Alexander congress, so I think it was 1988, Marj gave some workshops in London for teachers there, and I can remember someone was working with a student for a long time, and Marj finally said: "Do you ever talk to your students?" And it was kind of, even then, a bit of an unusual approach.

**FE**: That's right, and I actually had the pleasure of being able to go to the STAT (Society of Alexander Technique teachers) in London, I got to go to their archives and look, and it wasn't really until about the mid-1980s that people started writing about the Alexander Technique. Before then, it was extremely rare that there was ever an article. Other than just saying "you should have an experience with a teacher", they didn't explain what it was or how it worked, they just kind of sold it through the mystique and the fact that famous people had learned it.

**RR**: I think Frank Pierce Jones is probably an exception to that. He was writing in the 70s and he did try to explain. And there were one or two books but you're right, there was this idea that Alexander spent, as the legend went, ten or possibly nine years of self-experimentation and then he emerged with the knowledge which of course is completely false we now know. But there was this idea that he did this amazing thing that no one else could ever do, and so highly trained teachers of his work were the only way you could access his ideas.

**FE**: To a great extent that was true.

**RR**: And Marj took quite a different approach to that. You might say, she was a kind of a force for democracy in that kind of a an Alexander spring in today's terminology.

**FE**: The way she explained it to me is that she learned Alexander Technique in another culture. And it was her job to decide and look at how she was going to teach Alexander's principles to the American culture.

**RR**: Yes, and the American culture in the 30s when she eventually got back to Lincoln was very very very different from what she had experienced in London. And also as part of that talking to the student, another way of saying that was that she was encouraging the student to start thinking about how their thoughts influenced the quality of their movement. And she would do that really right from the beginning of working with anybody. And that, for sure, was not part of the standard methodology of the time.

Do you have anything else you want to say about your early experience with Marj?

**FE**: Well, the first time I really had experiences with Marj I was in a training program at Frank and Giora's, and it was about 1978, I think, maybe it was '77, and what I did was, I noticed that she was saying a lot of the same things over and over with people. And so being a good student, taking notes, I wrote some of these things down that she was saying. And also I really enjoyed about Frank Pierce Jones, *The resurrection of the body* by Maisel[[1]](#footnote--1), was that Maisel?

**RR**: Yeah, Maisel.

**FE**: Yeah, Maisel, that's it, the part I enjoyed the most were the teaching aphorisms where Alexander would say a little pithy thing about the Alexander Technique.

**RR**: And there are a lot of aphorisms of Marj Barstow. Some are online on her website at [www.marjoriebarstow.com](http://www.marjoriebarstow.com) and there are many many others out there. You probably have your own personal collection.

**FE**: I do! And so I wrote these down and I handed them out to the other members of my class, and she ran into this list and went: "Oh, that's interesting, yes I do say these things!"

**RR**: Yes, exactly! I guess my first encounter with Marj was in 1979, and I started writing down, like you did, whenever she said something interesting I would write it down as well, and I kept a record of that. And eventually the time came whenever Marj said anything that she thought might be interesting, she turned to me and said: "Bob, make sure you write that down!" She was a character... Certainly she was more interested in getting peope to think for themselves early on than perhaps most Alexander teachers were and perhaps more than many Alexander teachers still are. Another aspect of her work which really distinguished her at the time from everybody else was the fact that she was working with groups, and often extremely large groups. 70, 80, 100 people or more. Of course you never saw that in England in the late 70s or 80s. Would you like to say something about how she managed to pull that off?

**FE**: It was a very interesting situation because she rented a sorority house for us all to stay in, so most of the people who were at the workshop were staying at this huge sorority house. And of course there wasn't room to share rooms, so there were 5 or 6 people to a room and we just had a tremendously fun time together because everyone was trading whatever it was they knew and we had a talent show, and all the things that go on at workshops in that era made it so fun. The other interesting thing that has been mentioned is that because she was a senior teacher all of us were her students, no matter what our experience with the Alexander Technique was, we were all there to learn from her, so it was really fun to level the playing field with your teacher who was also at the workshop learning.

**RR**: Or someone who just walked in off the street.

**FE**: Right. So there was a wonderful egalitarian quality of it. And it was really interesting - I know of one person who walked in who had heard of her was a tennis pro who had gotten into an automobile accident and lost her swing, lost her coordination that she had innately developed and then lost because of the accident, and didn't know how to get it back. It was fascinating to look at what made Marj work with us in person longer, why did she do what she did. It seemed like she was able to just give someone as much as they were able to accept. What made her decide that enough was enough? And why with other people would she just completely be as generous as she wanted to because she thought maybe they can handle it in some way. It was fascinating to watch, and that's why it was so interesting to just sit there and watch her work with one person after another. Plus the group situation made it a certain amount of pressure, a performance experience, because one of the things that was so interesting about being in a big group of more people than you really knew looking at you is: a lot of use have anxiety about public speaking, and if you're an Alexander teacher you have to get over being a public speaker. So there was the perfect situation in a group situation where you had to walk your talk, and do what you said you were going to do, and demonstrate your intention, stay with your intention, demonstrate it, do the best that you could do while under pressure from everyone else could see exactly what you were doing because Marj used the class to train us to see the most subtle manners of movement as they were being demonstrated.

**RR**: You could learn a lot from just watching her, and it almost seemed as though, I had this experience more than once of noticing a physical change in me just from paying attention to her working with someone else. She had that power, you might say. I think she just exemplified something that transmitted itself to anyone who cared to pay attention.

**FE**: Yeah, and it was always interesting - well of course, in a big group like that you would say how can I - what makes Marj work with someone longer. So I would observe when she'd work with somebody and they'd say "Oh, that's interesting" or "Oh, that's good" she would stop. And when the person would work with her and then make an observation or ask a question or talk about what it was they were experiencing as they would experience it she would continue to work with them. So that trained me to be a better observer because I thought "Okay, my next turn with Marj, I'm going to pay attention what's going on with my whole body instead of just this thing she's paying attention to. What effect does it have on the rest of me. And I'm gonna make an observation because I'm gonna be paying attention." And sure enough, because my attention was that, it was possible to be able to pay attention to more. It's almost as if the skill that you're learning in Alexander Technique is to widen your field of awareness so that you're not focused like a search light. Your ability is more like a moving MRI throughout your body. You're developing the capacity to not just pay attention to what your head and neck are doing but then include your shoulders and your back and more of your back and your hips and your knees and the rest of you, and how that relationship is going and sustain it. It's almost as if your tolerance for the unfamiliar was directly challenged by your work with the teacher. It was cool.

**RR**: Yeah, it *was* cool. And I have to say there were some less noble strategies for getting some hand time with Marj. Certainly, it was really good to be a singer or at least to be willing to sing or a musician of any kind. You definitely wanted to have some activities that you could work with at an instance's notice. I took to singing basically because there wasn't much else I could do and I was a little terrified to use - I didn't want to say to Marj "Well, I'd like some help teaching somebody" cause I was already - well, when I first met her I was about half way through the training course. So most of the time I studied with her I was a teacher and I wasn't real comfortable going that route because I had seen what happened to other people. She was tough.

**FE**: She was tough and extremely absolute. And if you weren't capable of doing the most simple thing she would take you back to the beginning at the drop of a hat.

**RR**: Yeah, like walking over to the stool, what are you thinking about.

**FE**: Right, what's your intention?

**RR**: Yeah, so I was reluctant to subject myself to that in the early days and I opted more for a singing strategy which worked pretty well actually. You probably remember some of that.

**FE**: I would say that if you wanna learn the Alexander Technique the fastest, the best way and the most fastest to progress is to change the way you're speaking or use your voice in some way.

**RR**: Yeah, I think she would constantly come back to voice in ways sometimes it seemed a little bizarre but it sometimes made a lot of sense. I think she had that same idea that voice was a key to helping people. And of course the Alexander creation story emphasizes voice quite a bit. But I wanted to say something else about her groups that you may have noticed because I think we were more or less contemporaries of the whole span of her group teaching certainly from the late 70s through the 80s. I can remember some time around '84, '85 coming to the summer workshop at that sorority house at Wesleyan and I can remember it would often be 100 or more people in the room, the numbers were growing pretty fast. Marj was getting older, she was already past her mid-80s or in her mid-80s at that point, she was pretty frail, she had a lot of stamina but I was asking myself the question if the numbers keep increasing how is she going to manage that. And in fact the numbers kind of leveled off and I noticed that her strategy, this is over the years, her strategy, possibly unconscious on her part, I don't know, was to go a lot faster with people early on. I noticed as the years progressed that she would get people to places in a day or two that maybe it took a week or two a few years earlier. And that had the effect of weeding out some people who just couldn't deal with that. I mean it kind of became a bit of a self-selection process. I mean anyone was always welcome to come to any of her workshops and there were always new people. But I think it got a little more selective in terms of who stayed with the program later on. Did you notice that at all or do you have a different take on that?

**FE**: What I noticed about her is that she knew exactly how far she was taking you. And she would challenge her idea of how far you could handle, by giving you sort of - she was famous for taking you further in your last lesson right when you were leaving the workshop and in a sense, I don't know if you heard about this from other people, but she would kind of plant a bomb that would go off at some point later that would result in a psychological insight that was so profound it would change things for you that were often deeply buried psychological issues. You know, she's not a psychologist, no Alexander teacher is a psychologist, or they might be a concurrent psychologist, trained as a psychologist, but we don't get that training in our Alexander Technique classes of dealing with people's issues. So I think that's why she would take us a little extra far when we were leaving so that we'd have time in our own way to deal with it. Have you ever heard about that, did you ever do that?

**RR**: You know, I never had that experience but I do think that she, as you said earlier, she was a master of knowing how much she could zap you with and then letting you process and I think she intuitively understood that people really needed time to process what she was showing them. I mean she would often say after she worked with someone "Why don't you sit down and think about that for a while".

**FE**: Right.

**RR**: And she understood the value of that down-time and I think that's one of the ways you might say from a time management perspective she was able to work with so many people effectively because certainly if she had been stuck in the half hour or 45 minute whatever lesson paradigm ...

**FE**: ... it would have been too much.

**RR**: ... it would have been too much. You could not have absorbed it and she wouldn't have been able to help near as many people. In a sense, the groups got to be the size they got based on her ability to help that many people. You know, 100 people in the class means that you're not gonna get a lot of hands-on work from Marj and you might think "Oh, gee, I don't even know if it's worth being here" but honestly it was so worth being there. And you progressed just as fast as if there were 10 people in the class. It was pretty amazing in that regard.

**FE**: I actually felt thankful that I didn't have to have a long lesson with Marj because I've experienced being taken too far by other Alexander teachers and I don't think that it's very constructive to be taken too far. It's very impressive and it does impress you with the power of the Alexander Technique to make the changes in you but you cannot integrate - you integrate changes bit by bit. There's a certain reactive self-protection that rears its head and says "No no, this is too much, we can't take this" and it's a natural block against going too far into the unknown which may be dangerous. I don't know, it seems to come up when you learn something too fast and the part of you goes "Uh uh, it's time to go to sleep". [laughter]

**RR**: Yeah, and there was a lot of sleeping going on at these summer workshops. I mean, by the time after lunch people would be sprawled out on couches and in their rooms. There was a lot of processing going on.

**FE**: When you think about it, the brain, I'm told, was evolved to move our bodies around so changing the way that you move carves bigger areas of the brain in new pathways than any other action that you can possibly learn. In fact it's so marked that there was a study of college students who were taught to juggle and they were able to measure a whole new area in their brain that evolved to learn the skill. It was a measurable area and then when this college student stopped juggling that area would shrink. And there's also been documentations about, for instance, London is notorious for being a hugely complex area so much that a London cab driver actually has an area of their brain developed in order to handle the map of a huge area like London.

**RR**: Mmmh, yeah, that's true. And in fact in London to become a cab driver is a major undertaking. People spend years scooting around the city on motor bikes and so on to learn every street, every alley and so on. London, it's not just big, it has no order - it's not like Manhattan or something like that. That's interesting.

**FE**: Yeah, so there's an actual physical thing that's going on when you're learning about movement that has to be respected.

**RR**: And you know, Marj at times would, when she was - she wasn't generally inclined to wax philosophical but occasionally she would and one of the things she did say quite often was that in her view at some time in the future which wasn't really there yet there would be a true science of human movement and that Alexander's ideas would fit perfectly into that. And in fact a lot of the neuroscience that's kind of come to the fore in the last few year fits in perfectly with Alexander's ideas. And of course she was not a scientist, she was a little old lady who lived in Lincoln, Nebraska. She was not an intellectual in the normal sense of that word but she did have a pretty profound understanding of movement and so on. I wanna get back to your point about not spending inordinate amounts of time with any one student. I don't think you were around in Lincoln at the end of Marj's life in the 90s. But everything changed very dramatically starting around '92. I guess she was around 93 years old herself. There came a period when she was really not able anymore to work with groups. She just didn't have the ability to take in a lot of people. I think her last group classes were maybe '91, maybe early '92. And after that, the way you would access her teaching is you would arrange a time to come over to her house and hang out with her. Usually, it was just you and Marj and a home health aide who would always stand behind her to make sure she didn't fall over backwards. And Marj's way of teaching became mostly non-verbal and the lessons would last forever. An hour, two hours sometimes, with a little break here and there. And it was all her running her hands along your body, it was very important or very useful to wear shirts with vertical stripes, that was really a good thing to do because she would trace out those patterns, and she was doing a kind of hands-on work that I a little bit would connect with something like really good cranial work, cranio-sacral work, but it was much much more powerful. And she was able to do that in a way that didn't blow your circuits.

**FE**: Wow.

**RR**: Yeah, it was like a whole different thing that probably took place over about a two-year period. There were not a lot of people who experienced it, maybe a dozen or so of us. Sometimes two people would come over together and she would work with one first and then the other. And you never knew how long it was gonna last, and there'd be periods of sitting and just talking to her. But it was exactly the kind of work she would never do before, and it was incredibly powerful work is all I can say. I think Frank Ottiwell, one of the people you trained with, he was out here during that period and he wrote somewhere about how he was just standing next to Marj and she put a hand on his arm or his hand or something like that and he felt his entire body just expanding in some totally different way. And that's exactly the kind of thing that would happen at that late period.

**FE**: What I thought was: she essentially exemplified a lot of a sort of a zen teacher in many ways because she was so interested in having you pay attention now what you were doing *now*.

**RR**: She was a totally in-the-moment girl. She was not interested in talking about the past, it was very hard generally to get her to talk about her early experiences with Alexander or what happened yesterday in class. She just wasn't interested.

**FE**: It was difficult. I had some occasion to talk with her about principles and her experiences with the Alexander Technique and why she taught the way she did, because I went about half way through Frank and Giora's course and things got complicated for me and I had to quit my training for a while. And when Marj found out about that she offered to teach me in exchange for me writing about her approach and the way that she taught. So she would send me the impressions of people who had written her letters after workshops that she had done and it was quite a challenge to the process I went through to write about her work. And I would write about it and then call her up, write her a letter and bring it with me when I would see her. And we would sit down and she would tear it to shreds. [laughter]

**RR**: Yeah, she was a good editor. She was a tough and good editor.

**FE:** Which is probably why she wasn't really a writer because it was easier for her to be an editor than it was for her to be a writer.

**RR**: She wrote very little. She did write a few things and whenever she did write anything it was precise and clear and totally to the point. But that wasn't her main avenue of expression, for sure.

**FE**: No it wasn't.

**RR**: It wasn't. Is there anything else that you wanna add before we come to an end about Marj?

**FE:** When you find somebody who can teach you, and it really doesn't matter if other people understand what that teacher has to offer you, it's so interesting to know that there are many people that have things to offer you in the world as a student - pay attention because the time that you spend with somebody when you're learning, ask yourself questions like "Why did they do that", and nowadays you can actually ask the teacher "How come you did that, why are you putting your hands that way on me, what do you mean when you say this", and pretty much the teacher will actually answer you.

**RR**: Yeah, that is true today. But as you said earlier, it wasn't the way things were expected to be back in the day for the most part.

**FE**: Yeah, and it's so special when you find somebody. It's so amazing when you find somebody who can teach you. It doesn't matter if you can explain what you're learning to someone else because that's one of the marks of learning is that it's difficult to explain. It's attractive because you *are* learning it. It's okay to not be able to explain to someone else why you're so fascinated with the Alexander Technique or whatever it is you wanna learn. Go ahead and learn it.

**RR**: Right, right. She used to say to people at the end of workshops, she said: "Well, you're going home now and people are probably gonna ask you what you learned in Nebraska", which was sort of an esoteric location for many of them, and she said: "You probably shouldn't tell 'em that you came out here and learned a little bit of nothing." You remember that? She used to say that. [laughter]

Well, maybe this is a good place to bring our conversation to a close. My guest has been Franis Engel, who is an Alexander teacher in Waimea on the Big Island of Hawaii. We'll put a link to her website by the interview. If you live in Hawaii - I'm guessing you're just about the only teacher there. I think you told me there was another one somewhere.

**FE**: There's another teacher here on the island but he's an osteopath and has a second business taking people out in a boat so he doesn't really have to teach Alexander Technique, just uses it for himself.

**RR**: But you're in Waimea, that's a short hop from Kona which is a kind of a happening tourist place there, I've been there a few times. And we will also put a link by this interview - well, this interview will be posted at the website devoted to Marjorie Barstow, marjoriebarstow.com, and Marjorie is spelled M A R J O R I E, so we'll put the interview there. So, Franis, thank you so much for being on the show today.

**FE**: Thank you, Robert.

Transcribed by Saskia Breitling

1. [http://lccn.loc.gov/69016608](http://lccn.loc.gov/69016608%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\_Maisel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Maisel%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) [↑](#footnote-ref--1)