**Alexander Audio - Robert Rickover**

**Marjorie Barstow's teaching - 1**

**Guest: Michael Frederick**

Aired 2 April 2012

**RR**: Hello, this is Robert Rickover at Alexander Audio and today my guest is Michael Frederick, an Alexander Technique teacher in Los Angeles. Michael, like myself, has studied in England, he trained with Walter Carrington in England, I trained with an offshoot of Walter Carrington's course back in the late 70s, early 80s. Michael and I also both studied extensively with Marjorie Barstow, an American Alexander teacher, the first graduate of Alexander's first formal training course and pretty much a lifelong resident of Lincoln, Nebraska. And we're gonna talk today about Marj's teaching and what its relevance is for Alexander teachers today. Michael, welcome to the show.

**MF**: Thank you, I'm happy to be here.

**RR**: So I think we should start by each of us sharing our initial impressions of Marj. If you wanna go first on that...

**MF**: Oh sure. I first met her it must have been January / February 1974. I had spent the last three years in England and during that time period I'd had a whole series of Alexander lessons with Walter Carrington and Peggy Williams and lots of teachers. And then I was living in Iowa City, of all places, for about six months. Marj Barstow came to the University of Iowa, to the music department, and I went there to check her out, as it were, and she was giving classic chair turns in front of a group of musicians and other people who were interested. So when it became my turn, I stand in front of a chair and she puts hands on and my immediate response, Robert, was: "Oh my God, her direction is so strong, it's just like Peggy Williams." And up to that moment my gold standard of strong direction was this lady Peggy Williams who lived in Highgate, who had trained with F.M. Alexander and also Walter Carrington. So that was my first impression of her. It was quite striking. I can visualize it very easily as I'm talking to you.

**RR**: Mmh, that's interesting that she was doing a sort of a traditional chair lesson at that point. By the time I first met her, which was in the winter of 1979, 1980 I think it was here in Lincoln, she wasn't really doing those kinds of lessons anymore. She had for reasons that we might go into decided not to. And I should say that I was halfway through my training course at that point. I had heard about Marjorie, and what I had heard about her that intrigued me was that she did group work. At that time in England group work was pretty controversial. There were some very nasty meetings about that, oh you probably remember those.

**MF**: Sure, yes.

**RR**: And there were people who basically said anyone who taught the Alexander Technique in groups was totally debasing the method. And I had heard that she did a pretty good job and I was curious how she did that. And what I remember, a couple of things: this was over the winter break so we were in the basement of the music department at the University of Nebraska and I remember going into that room a few minutes before the class began, and there were these kind of molded chairs and I thought "Oh, Marj isn't gonna like that, she's gonna want some regular chairs, these don't seem like Alexander-friendly chairs", and I also assumed since there were about 25 people taking this class that she was gonna be real busy with her hands, she's gonna have to be moving around a lot giving everyone lessons. Well, both those assumptions were completely wrong. She really didn't care remotely about the chair situation, and I'd say a good 90, maybe even 95% of the time, she wasn't actually using her hands. But when she did use them, as you said, the direction was extremely powerful and clear and yet very light and subtle at the same time. And over the course of that workshop which was two weeks long, I think six hours a day, right through New Year's Day (we didn't take any breaks), you know she was about 80 years old at that point, and it was an incredibly intensive experience - fourteen days straight of this. I knew at the end of that that this was the person I wanted to study with when I finished my training course in England which I had no interest in dropping. I just realized that she was to my mind working at a higher level than anything that was going on in England at the time. So why don't you, Michael, kind of we can maybe go back and forth a bit on this - what are some of the things that struck you then and maybe in later years about Marj's teaching that makes it different or made it different from other teachers in your view?

**MF**: Right. Well, I'll just continue just very briefly about what happened to me after I had that brief experience with Marj at University of Iowa at the music department. I went back to England and trained as an Alexander teacher with Walter and Dilys Carrington and basically lived in England till Easter '79, so I was at the Carrington's for four years, three years to be certified and a year post-graduate work and even lived there at their home at the training school for a couple of years. So I had a very in-depth experience of Walter and Dilys's teaching and of the English approach, because we would, my wife at the time, Lena Frederick and I would study with lots of other people besides the Carringtons, so we had a general sense of the overall community. Then in 1979 we moved back to the States permanently and we moved to California. And then Lena was very interested in working with Marj, so she would go to Marj. I think she went in the summer of 1980, and I didn't go. But I went out there it must have been the summer of '81, and I just loved it. It's like what you said, I mean, to me she was an absolute cut above anything else and I'm so careful in that statement 'cause I absolutely loved and adored Walter and Dilys Carrington. They were so kind to me and I had such a wonderful training there. But Marj was really post-graduate work. I was interviewed by the Conables around that time about my experience, and what I said was in England, what I had really learned was physical-psycho work. But with Marj it was the first time I truly experienced psycho-physical work. Now I know I was getting clever and flipping the word there and all that, but it was a different league. She would work with you with your thinking in a dialogue way where she would take you down that path before she'd even put hands on and getting you to work with yourself. And then when she would put hands on it would completely support the verbal work that she had done with you. And there was a fundamental shift in your whole central nervous system, quite extraordinary. And the thing I loved about her was her ability to debunk any of your security blankets and belief systems. Now, I happen to be the type of guy that I just love that type of approach to learning. So with Marj she was right up my alley. So here she was, you know, any time I felt secure, you know, she'd be there and sort of deconstruct me. And, you know, I just, even to this day, I just smile even talking about it.

**RR**: And we should say those times that Lena and you came out to Lincoln early on, this was, Marj was sort of well into her large group workshops particularly in the summer, where - I don't know, I started going in '83 to the summer ones. There were sometimes as many as 75 or 100 people in the room with her there. And you might think "Well, how can anyone get much out of this with one teacher and 100 people" and even then she wasn't using her hands all that much. But the thing is that you did. She of course worked with individuals in the way you describe, but she was always very aware of the group. And I found that I would be making changes as I sat in the group watching her.

**MF**: Absolutely.

**RR**: Just kind of picking up on her direction I suppose or the words that she was using with whoever she was working with. It was an astonishing experience. And I agree totally with you about the psycho-physical as opposed to the physical-psycho if you wanna call it that. She really really emphasized your thinking. "What are you thinking about right now, what's your mental intent right now". And she would be very insistent on that but not in a way that would put most people off. I would say the one group of people who had the toughest time with her were Alexander teachers. For two reasons: one, there was a huge emphasis in her classes on doing some activity that she could help you with and a lot of Alexander teachers didn't have any activities in mind other than possibly teaching which lead to the second thing: if you did say "I'd like some help with teaching", you had better be prepared for one of the strictest encounters you were ever gonna have with an Alexander teacher. Because if you said to her "I'd like to do some table work" or "I'd like to do some chair work with somebody" she was gonna be getting you to notice your thinking right from the beginning as you were walking over to the table: "What are you thinking about?"

**MF**: Let me give an example. There was one summer, because Lena and I would also go in the winters too, but the summers it was such a wonderful experience. The winters she had the snow in Nebraska, but in the summers she had that great quality. And so she said to me "What would you like to do?" and I said "I would like to go work with this Alexander teacher named Michael Chase" who had trained with Frank Ottiwell in San Francisco. I said "Marj, I'd like to work with Michael Chase on the table". And she looked at me and you could see her just move up and she said: "I don't know why you want to do that, but if you do, okay." So I walked over with a certain amount of confidence, I mean after all I had trained in England, and you know the English trained people felt a cut above the American trained teachers. So I walked over there and Michael's on the table and I stop in front of the head of the table with Michael lying there and of course I'm doing the classic inhibiting, I'm stopping and inhibiting before I put hands on, at least that's in my thinking. So Marj says, she sees me stop there, she says "What are you doing?" And I said "Well, Marj, I'm inhibiting", and she said "No, you're not, you're fixing. Now come back here and start over." So I went back to the chair and I got up and she said "Now, just get going", and I got up and I walked over there and I very delicately put hands on either side of Michael's head and she said "That's better." I mean but she absolutely nailed me. And of course, you know, at that moment, I was scared, I felt "Oh my God what's gonna happen". She had an amazing way again of challenging your assumptions of wherever you were in your sort of fixed approach to teaching, but she always gave you a foundation to work from, that's what I loved. In England, so often, they sometimes assumed that you had such debauched kinesthesia in your whole system that you didn't know anything and the teacher because they had trained knew so much and you had to just take that, I don't know, almost passive viewpoint as the teacher worked with you. What Marj would do, would see that you had some natural intelligence about your own use and she would build on that. She had such a keen eye that she would see where you were actually doing pretty good and she would give you a positive feedback and then let you grow from there.

**RR**: Right, yeah. And it's interesting - I remember once having a lesson with Walter Carrington and we were talking about teaching 'cause you know Walter would deliver these amazing little talks during his lesson that would begin usually after 3 or 4 minutes and would always end pretty much right at the end of the lesson. It was astonishing how he put that together and teach at the same time. And it was all based on, it was all relevant to your situation, he didn't just have little can talks, and I remember asking him once what he would say to a new student about the Alexander Technique and he said that he did everything in his power for the first ten lessons with anyone not to talk at all about the Alexander Technique. And his thinking, as I understood it, was that he wanted people to get to a certain state that he would help them get there and then it would start making sense to talk about directing and inhibiting and all the rest of it. And I think that's a valid approach...

**MF**: Yes.

**RR**: ... but Marj took a very different tack, she, as you said, she could very quickly figure out where you were in a spectrum of awareness and ability to think, and she always assumed at the beginning, before you know - her first assumption was "Yeah, you could start to change yourself right now with appropriate kind of thinking", and then if that didn't work she would try something else, but she really got people to think about themselves right from the beginning. And in her workshops there was absolutely now distinction between teachers of many years teaching experience and someone who just walked off, came in from the street.

**MF**: Absolutely.

**RR**: You would be hard-pressed sometimes to tell other than if you really were looking carefully, some Alexander teachers were a little stiffer.

**MF**: Exactly right, the stiff people were probably the teachers.

**RR**: The teachers, and they wouldn't be doing real obvious slumps, you know, but other than that, someone walking into the room would have no idea who was an expert and who knew nothing.

**MF**: That's exactly right. And just to go back a little bit, you know, Walter Carrington had his own approach, and as you said, it was very valid. And Marj had her approach. And to me they were both very complementary, even though different. So I just wanted to make that statement.

**RR**: Oh absolutely.

**MF**: You know, it's a bit like learning to climb a mountain: you can study with one mountain climber who might have a certain technique and you climb the mountain, and then you can go and learn from another type of mountain climber who has a completely different technique. The important thing is to follow through from the bottom of the mountain to the top, so you actually get the whole action. And ... anyway.

**RR**: And I think, I've heard it expressed by people and I think there may be some truth in it that Walter's clientele in general tended to be older people whereas Marj's clientele was much more mixed, I'd say skewed towards younger people.

**MF**: Absolutely, yeah.

**RR**: And Marj herself was - I think, for example, table work which she rarely did but when she did it was brilliant, I think table work kind of bored her. I think she was really interested in moving around and getting people, you know, sort of more moving.

**MF**: Well, that's a point I wanted to make: if you think of the old guard, if you think of Dr. Barlow and Marjorie Barlow and Walter Carrington and Dilys Carrington and Patrick Macdonald, and then there is Marj. Marj was the only one who was actually a performer. She was a dancer.

**RR**: That's right.

MF: And F.M. Alexander was an actor. All these other people, the Carringtons and the Barlows and Mr. Macdonald, they weren't. Marj truly understood how to apply the Alexander principles to the performing arts world, more than anyone else. And, you know, I remember being astounded whenever, you know, she said slumping is part of your flexibility. When I first heard that, you know, because ...

**RR**: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

**MF**: ... prior to that, slumping was like bad. But you know, the more I think about it, whenever you're an actor, you're gonna play characters in conflict, and they're going to slump, they're gonna have various patterns physically of interference. And what Marj was able to do was able to get you to think through the whole spectrum of your movement possibility, not just what you initially might think is good use.

**RR**: So if you're an actor and you need to be in a bit of a slump to play that role she wouldn't tell you not to slump, she would say "Well, let's see how easily you can slump".

**MF**: Exactly right, she'd get you to do that action with less tension. So you'd give the impression of a habitual slump but in your experiential self there'd be much more delicacy as an actor.

**RR**: One thing I also wanna say, though, is that while she was very biased, as it were, towards engaging your thinking, if she encountered somebody who genuinely was not capable of thinking let's say in the Alexander sense (I can remember several examples of that), and by that I mean someone who might be very intelligent, very skilled, but simply could not remain in the moment for any length of time at their current state as it were, she would, if need be, resort to a more traditional approach in the sense that she would, she wouldn't keep bugging them about it, she would just use her hands to give them an experience. And I can remember, she used to have classes in her home when I moved out here in the 90s where there was a lady who came who was a musician, professor actually at the university, very smart lady, very talented, but was one of these people that could not stay present in the present. And Marj tried working with her for several classes and then one day, I'm sitting there watching and I could see that Marj just realized, "Okay, there is no point in harrassing her as it were about - I'm just gonna use my hands and..." And there are two interesting things about that in my mind: first of all, this lady kept coming, she was a regular, and after Marj died, I inherited her as a student, and there came a point a couple of years after Marj died when this lady started to be much more able to think and was actually quite good at it, but she obviously wasn't ready earlier on and there was no point in trying to force the issue. And I'm sure you've probably seen occasional times when someone would bring in someone with a serious injury or in one case a child who had some sort of serious illness - there was no, there wasn't gonna be any sort of standard Marjian Alexander get your thinking mode stuff, she'd just go in there and do what's described, that Alexander describes once where he goes and takes some doctor's patient, just rearranges them, you know. That's what was needed to do, that would be the most useful thing to do, to give them a, show them a possibility. And they wouldn't keep it, but they would keep part of it, maybe.

**MF**: Well, the thing we also said, part of her brlliance was that she had this amazing adaptability to the individual. She would listen, really listen to you and watch you, keen observer. And then she would figure out how to best access you so you could learn.

**RR**: And always with, if it was in a group setting, which it usually was until the very end of her life, she was very aware of what she was saying in terms of how people in the group would interpret it. Very careful with her choice of words.

**MF**: Right, because she knew that people would take her ideas and words and go off in the wrong direction. I remember one time at the first international congress at Stony Brook University, international congress for the Alexander Technique in 1986, and I have it on film, no one's seen this and it's gonna be out there but Marj was working with Judy Leibowitz. Now at that moment in 1986, Judy Leibowitz was the grand lady of Alexander teacher training and teaching in New York City and really one of the foundational people of the Alexander Technique in North America, in the United States. And Judy had had polio as a young girl and, so here she is, she was probably at that time I'm guessing in her fifties, and there was Marj maybe early sixties, and Judy and Marj, they're working together. And Marj was so considerate of Judy, I mean she absolutely was aware that all these Alexander teachers in the room, probably 50% of them at least, had been trained by Judy. So, you know, she was very sensitive to that. But then she absolutely tuned into Judy Leibowitz's thinking and was able to get her to walk with much more ease and delicacy but in a way, with immense respect. So... Sometime I'll show it to you, it's just amazing to watch.

**RR**: We need to get that video on Youtube, Michael. Yeah, she was very clear, always, that she wasn't looking for any kind of standard way of moving, you know. She respected individual styles or people's individual situations. So obviously Judy who, as you say, suffered from polio and was a remarkable woman...

**MF**: And teacher, she was an amazing teacher.

**RR**: ... was not going to, when her walk got easier, it wasn't gonna be the same as perhaps your or my walk getting easier, it was gonna be a different kind of easy. And Marj was totally tuned into that. You know an example that comes to my mind about her really tuning into an individual who would ask a question was on one of the winter workshops in the early 80s, someone had just sort of, had come for 2 or 3 classes and never been around Marj before. And, it was a kid about 21 years old maybe, and he raises his hand and he said: "Marj, you know, this is my third class", he said, "how come I have to keep coming back for this?" You know, "why can't I just get it?" And Marj - there was a really long pause, and you could see the wheels turning in her head, what was she gonna say to this guy, and she looked right at him, he was a fairly tall strapping guy and of course Marj was a fairly small lady, and she looked right at him and she said "I don't think your body could take it."

**MF**: Wow.

**RR**: How about that?

**MF**: That's amazing.

**RR**: And that was exactly the right answer, too. As long as I'm talking about this kind of thing, another example of her really being aware of the group and how people's preconceptions might slip in and cause people to distort what she said, in one of her summer workshops, you might have even been there, it was at the Phi Mu house, someone said, this is with about 75, 100 people in the room, someone said "Marj, how come you never talk about inhibition?" And again, the long pause, the wheels turning, and she said "But that's all I ever talk about."

**MF**: I *was* there that summer and I remember that moment very clearly when Marj said that inhibition was all that she ever did, also she ever talked about.

**RR**: Right, and afterwards, the Alexander teachers in the group, a lot of us were talking about what she had said, obviously, and I don't really know where this idea came from, it wasn't totally original with me but I remember sort of an idea that maybe Marj's version of inhibition was a more dynamic one. In the analogy which I thought was a nice one and I don't know whether I came up with it or somebody else, but let's say you're driving down the highway and you realize you're going in the wrong direction, what do you do? You pull over to the side, and you may make a u-turn. Now you may come to a complete stop, if need be, or you may just, if It's a deserted two-lane highway, you may pull over and just do a u-turn and, you know, slow down obviously but reverse direction. And that would be a kind of a, you're inhibiting the thing you don't want which is going one direction, and now you're going in the opposite direction. I think Marj even said something like "Well, what does inhibition mean? It means don't do the thing you don't wanna do." I think that was her phrase at the time.

**MF**: Exactly right. And the thing that was absolutely revolutionary in my thinking and almost contrary to the type of thinking that pervaded the whole English Alexander scene: when Marj said that inhibition is movement. Now, I remember watching Alexander teachers unable to process that. You know, to them, it was just too much of a radical way of looking at things, but it's absolutely true. You see, if you want to go North and you find you're going South, what you have to do is change direction. And if you are an athlete or an actor in the midst of the sport or the performance, you cannot stop and say to the audience "Well, I have to stop now, I notice myself tightening and I have to inhibit a little bit before I re-engage in the performance". What you have to be able to do is change it within the action. And Marj was superbe at that. So, the idea that inhibtion is movement was something that as I said was unique and a completely different perspective.

**RR**: Another aspect of Marj's teaching that I think is worth dwelling on a little bit is what I guess you could call the basic simplicity of it. Occasionally, you know, people would start to ask questions about, people would say "You know, yesterday when I was working those directions didn't work" or "What's gonna happen tomorrow", or sometimes people would get into sort of theoretical discussions about direction or whatever, and I remember once, again it was during the summer, one of the summer workshops, this was kind of going on a bit, and Marj sort of brought the discussion to a close, she said, I'll never forget this, she said "You people won't believe how simple this work is." Now she didn't say "how easy it was".

**MF**: No, "simple", exactly.

**RR**: It's "simple". And she, you know, in a lot of ways, I'm going out on a limb here, but in some ways Marj was a somewhat simple person in that she wasn't the kind of person that you would have discussions about current events or political theories or... You know, she was pretty, she was really into basic stuff, like upkeep of her house.

**MF**: Well, exactly.

**RR**: You know, she was a member of the doll club of Lincoln. She was in some ways somewhat, I don't wanna say constrained but ...

**MF**: She was simple, Robert, like a Buddhist teacher.

**RR**: Yeah, yeah.

**MF**: She was in the present moment.

**RR**: She really was in the moment.

**MF**: And what was happening now, what needed to be done now, whether it was how you served food at a table, how you cleaned a table after a meal, how you wrote when you wrote a letter, how you simply walked down the street, it was all basic, you know. I remember the great Buddhist teacher, Thích Nhất Hạnh[[1]](#footnote--1), was asked "why do you wash dishes", and his answer was "I wash dishes to wash dishes". And Marj was like that. She was doing whatever she was doing and that was it. And she was extremely rigorous about negative thinking. If you watched peope who would get wrapped up in their self-pity or their negative thinking she absolutely nailed it.

**RR**: And she combined that with an incredible devotion to Alexander's ideas. Not a day went by that she didn't devote quite a bit of time to experimenting on herself even during some periods of time when she, well there were periods of time when she wasn't really doing a lot of teaching. I think from probably around 1940 to around 1970, that, you know, I think most of the time she wasn't teaching, she was doing other stuff, she was running a family business, working on the ranch, whatever. I mean people did come for lessons and she had a bit of a reputation among people in the know in the Alexander world which of course was tiny at that time. But it wasn't really until she was in her seventies that she became well-known on a broader scale. So - but she never tired of thinking about Alexander's ideas.

**MF**: Well, yeah, I mentioned to you once in a conversation about how there'd be times I'd be traveling with her, we went to Australia, we went around America, we went to Europe, and I was the guy who had always go get her at the hotel and then have breakfast with her before we went to a workshop. And so often I'd go pick her up and I would notice on the bedstand next to her bed she would have a copy of *CCC[[2]](#footnote-0)* or *Use of the self* that she was reading. That was her nightly reading. And it was underlined with notes on the pages. And then we would go have breakfast and there was one very clear time I remember in San Francisco where I'm eating with her at breakfast and we both have the food in front of us and I'm sort of shoveling the food in and I sense the stillness watching me, and I look at her and she was watching me and she does this with her eyes, she looked from the top of my head down through my whole body to where I'm sitting on the chair and back up again and then she looks me in the eye and just shakes her head right and left with this pitiful look, like "what an idiot you are, Michael, and the way you're eating". You know, she didn't say a word. And of course I slowed down and then, I'm sure you know, eating with her, I mean she always took so long and it got to be a bit of a game to see if you could leave a little bit of food on your plate, you know, and let Marj finish first, if you can manage to do it. I remember crossing a street with her once and my thinking went like this "Oh my gosh I have this 85-year-old woman with me, I'd better take her arm for help as I cross the street". And then it dawned on me that "Oh my God, this woman moves better than I can and could help *me* cross the street better".

**RR**: Yeah, when I first met her I think she was just about 80 years old and her face was quite wrinkled, she looked 80 in her face but if you were to see her walking down the street and you didn't see her face you'd think it was a 35-year-old.

**MF**: Yeah, much younger.

**RR**: She looked very very graceful. Of course towards the end of her life she did have osteoporosis and it kicked in pretty severely in her 90s, or even her late 80s, and she was quite bent.

**MF**: She had some severe falls, too.

**RR**: She had a number of falls.

**MF**: On the steps of her house and fell backwards, I know, at least once.

**RR**: Yeah, right. But even with that, and actually maybe we should talk a little bit about her final years because she died in 1995, but from - I moved out to Lincoln in 1990, I organized workshops for her, but there came a point, I'd say about 2 years into that, where first of all it became clear that we couldn't do the really large workshops anymore because she did not have, she kind of lost, in one sense lost the ability to take into account a large number of people. So we had workshops with 10 or 12 people, and that was fine for a while. And then there came a point when it was just physically too demanding for her. And the last couple of years of her teaching were either individual lessons or maybe 2 people. Actually there would be 3 people: there would be the home health aide who would, if Marj got up, would always be standing behind her to prevent her from falling over backwards and 1 or 2 students. And what we had at that point was a very different kind of teaching. It was lots of hands-on, not much talking. Marj was I think veering into dementia or senility, not totally but - it started to become important what kind of shirt you wore because you wanted one with vertical lines on it, she would trace out those lines and that would be a real... And her hands were amazing as they had been before, kind of reached a new level. I would actually describe that work towards the end, a lot of it, as basically table work but mostly you sitting in a chair.

**MF**: Yeah, that's correct. I mean there are a couple of things I'd like to touch on and then I'll lead into what you were just talking about. First of all, she was very game, before she had that period, she was very game to do anything you wanted to suggest. And I did wanna back up just a bit and talk about how I would push her to do chair work and table work and whispered ahs and things like that and hands on back of chair. And then she started doing it and she was absolutely phenomenal teaching the basic procedures. One time I was with Frank Ottiwell and we were working on the table and I was working with Frank and Marj was to my right working with me, and I knew in my life I would probably never have so clear psycho-physical learning as I was in that moment teaching with Frank the Alexander Technique. I mean, she was so specific about constructive thinking, about me engaging the student's awareness, in getting feedback and about the proper use of your hands and not doing too much but being connected. It was phenomenal. So I just wanted to bring that in that she was open, because sometimes I will hear people say "Oh she didn't...", this happened not too long ago someone said "Oh she never did table work", that's rubbish.

**RR**: That's not true.

**MF**: Not true at all. You know, and people say she didn't do hands on back of chair - again, she did. So one has to sort of debunk faulty history. But then leading into the time span, last time I saw her, I think it was '91, might have been '92, I don't remember exactly, but Lena Frederick and myself and Frank Ottiwell went to Lincoln, Nebraska, to work with her. And we were at her house. And I smiled when she talked about lines in your shirt and things. She would work with you, and I swear, she would work on the folds of your clothes, but you would feel like your whole central nervous system was revamping. And she said "Just adjust you know your collar of your shirt or something.“ And then the most profound moment I ever had with her was: we were in her living room, again Frank, Lena and I, and she said "Why don't we do a little walking", she said, and so she was working with me, and she took me for a walk, and she said "Now just keep going", and I took about 5 steps into the living room, and I swear, Robert, I disappeared. That's all I can say. All there was for a nano second was a bubble of awareneness. There was no Michael Frederick. Of course, very quickly, Michael Frederick came back and said "Wow, that was amazing", but it was an extraordinary thing and I absolutely concur with you that at the end of her life, her direction, she was in a stratosphere as far as the powerhouse of direction.

**RR**: And interesting incident, you know, as I said, towards the end of her life she always had home health aides there and they would typically sit, if Marj was sitting, they would just sit in a chair in the room, if Marj was standing they would stand behind her. And there was one in particular, Becky, who I remember very well, who was very very fond of Marj, and after one of the classes, Becky asked me, she said "You know, when Marj is teaching, I feel like I'm a little lighter inside myself, is that possible?" and I said, "Yup", and this is like, you know, a 20-year-old student who didn't know anything about the Technique except what she saw with Marj obviously. I would like - do you have anything else about Marj that you, kind of to sum up her legacy, why she's important for us today?

**MF**: The psycho-physical nature of her work. To me it was in a nutshell. In the Alexander community we talk about not trying to feel things out, and Marj always said "What you learn to recreate is a delicate movement, you're not learning to recreate a feeling". And one time I was working with her, and she had worked with me in a chair, and I was moving beautifully, I mean I felt fantastic, you know that sense of inner freedom that came about from working with her and her direction. And then she said "Okay, now stand up and take a walk" and I stood up and I took 3 steps and she said "Stop", I said "Why, Marj? I feel fantastic!", she said "No, you've already lost it". It was an extraordinary moment within myself of seeing how I had the trace feeling of this phenomenal work she had just done with me in the chair. But I had not - I was relying on that.

**RR**: You got drawn into it.

**MF**: I got drawn into it, it was like an addiction. I got hung up on the feeling of the great direction and lightness and ease but I had stopped doing the constructive thinking. And that's what she nailed. And to me, I don't know any Alexander teacher in the world who had that sensitivity of psycho-physical learning.

**RR**: Yeah, I agree with that.

**MF**: It was extraordinary, you know.

**RR**: And, I was gonna say, well, is there anything else that you wanted to sort of...? I was gonna say, just for a moment, mercifully there are quite a few video clips of her teaching in Youtube, and if you go to marjoriebarstow.com you can find links to those. Some of those are really worth looking, there's one in particular I can think of where she talks about constructive conscious control and it is just brilliant. It's about 3 or 4 minutes long, and basically it really explains constructive conscious control in a way that I don't think most other teachers would put it that way. Anyway, is there any final thought you have? 'Cause I have a final thought but I'll let your final thought...

**MF**: Well, one of my final thoughts that could really get me in trouble.

**RR**: Go for it, Michael.

**MF**: It has to do with F.M. Alexander. The assumption in the Alexander world is that F.M. Alexander was the greatest Alexander teacher that ever existed, and that is absolutely illusory thinking.

**RR**: Oh I think so, yeah.

**MF**: Alexander was the founder, he was the gentleman who had the insight of the principles that became known as the Alexander Technique. And again, in his lifetime, it was never called the Alexander Technique, it was called "psychophysical re-education", or "the work". But he was the gentleman who started it all, but to think that he was the greatest teacher is really dangerous thinking. To me, Marj took it to a completely different level.

**RR**: I agree.

**MF**: And it goes along with what we talked about and one interview about how Walter Carrington had, I had asked him were the training courses better in F.M.'s day or today...

**RR**: That was Patrick Macdonald, right. I asked him.

**MF**: Yeah, you asked him.

**RR**: I asked him what was the best training course, he said they were all terrible, but his was the least bad of them.

**MF**: Right, but the courses were better today than in F.M.'s day.

**RR**: I would imagine so, it would be depressing if they weren't, really.

**MF**: Exactly.

**RR**: And Alexander himself was always very clear that he was just taking the first steps, pointing a sign post as it were to developments down the road.

**MF**: So, you know, to me, Marj had really taken the teaching to a different psycho-physical level. And when you talk about her caretaker Becky simply sitting in the room and feeling lighter and easier in that atmosphere. The only time I've ever experienced that in my life any other place except Marj had been with some spiritual teacher I was studying with in India or in Turkey, you know, someone who had, through their own inner work, affected the atmosphere that was around them. So they actually felt more centered and collected and whole being in their presence. To me Marj had, through her own simple work on herself her whole life, had transformed her own being. Now, these are big statements and people who didn't know her can "Oh my God, you worship this lady" - well, maybe we did a bit. But you know, the truth is she was a perfect example of that pioneer spirit of a woman from the 1800s, you know, 1899 in Orden, Nebraska she was born. She was from a different time, she had an inner strength and a will, an amazing will to follow through and to work on herself. And the final thing for me was, you know, she had gone back to Lincoln, Nebraska, after working with F.M. Alexander in London and then A.R. Alexander a lot, and she said she went back and there wasn't any Alexander teacher for at least 1,000 miles if not further. And she said, she started feeling sorry for herself, but then she realized that that wasn't constructive and that she had to get tough with herself. And that's when things changed in her life. That moment when, in England they have the phrase "you have to grasp the stinging nettles", and Marj did that. And through her own inner work she became this absolutely extraordinary teacher of psychophysical re-education.

**RR**: Right, and that ties in with my theory about Marj and Alexander which, again we're going out on a limb here, but, you know, if you think about most of the teachers Alexander trained in his first few training courses, the majority of them were British and stayed in England and then a lot of them were in the London scene and interacting with each other, sometimes in not very constructive ways. And Marj on the other hand to me was like a missile dispatched to the middle of nowhere.

**MF**: Lincoln, Nebraska.

**RR**: Lincoln, Nebraska, you know, no teachers anywhere around, and - I'm not saying that Alexander planned this in any ways, I'm sure he didn't, but maybe the universe had an idea "Well we wanna take this discovery, we wanna plant it somewhere very different and removed from the hothouse of London with all the squabbles among the teachers and put it into an almost pioneery..." - well, Lincoln's not exactly pioneery, but...

**MF**: Back then it was.

**RR**: Yeah, a totally different universe and let it emerge separate from all the junk that was going on elsewhere. And I think what came out of that was this amazing teaching that we've been talking about. And I think that if you had - I remember sitting in one of Marj's group classes, I don't think it was one of the really big ones, maybe 30 people or something, and thinking "Well, supposing I was F. Matthias Alexander looking at this, what would I think?" And channeling F.M., I think what I would say is "Wow, this is quite different from most of the work I've done, this woman is clearly - she's teaching in a different way than I taught for the most part, and she's using a different vocabulary than I used but she is certainly true to the principles that I discovered and she's damn good at it! And I'm very proud, you know, to have been her teacher." That's what I would think F.M. would say.

**MF**: Well, you know, that goes along - I was standing in 1986 when Marj and Patrick Macdonald first saw each other after about 40 years, and Patrick very clearly came up to Marj and said "Ah, Marj, it's so wonderful to see you", and he looked her in the eye and said "You know, you were the best of all of us in those early years, you had the best hands". And for me, you know, she had the potential, even in the early years, and then, as you said, she went to Lincoln, and she really let those seeds grow and she made her own discoveries and she was rigorously adherent to Alexander's basic principles. And she became an absolutely unique and original teacher.

**RR**: Well, I think we should end the conversation on that note. What do you think?

**MF**: I agree, and bless Marj.

**RR**: Bless Marj, yeah.

**MF**: Okay.

**RR**: You can visit her tomb at Wyuka Cemetery, if you want.

**MF**: Well, there's a thought. I've never thought of that. To me, she's alive, you know, I'd be teaching and she's tapping me on the shoulder or giving me a whack on the side of the head.

**RR**: Anyone who is intrigued by our conversation, and I really can't recommend those Youtube videos enough because you will see one batch from the early 80s and then one batch from 1990, and then hopefully, Michael, you're gonna make available some of the early material.

**MF**: I am, absolutely.

**RR**: It really should be on Youtube, that's where people are gonna find it. Anyway, so go to marjoriebarstow.com, that's M A R J O R I E Barstown dot com, or just look up Marjorie Barstow on Youtube, you'll find it. Anyway, my guest has been Michael Frederick, an Alexander Technique teacher in Los Angeles, trained in England, studied also with Marj Barstow, like myself, very parallel in that sense, and we've been talking about the late, or as we say in Country Music, the late great Marj, Marjorie Barstow. Michael, thanks so much for being on the show.

**MF**: Thank you very much, it's been a pleasure and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Transcribed by Saskia Breitling

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thich_Nhat_Hanh> [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. I.e. *Constructive Conscious Control*. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)