



F.M. Alexander and the Resurrection of the Body

F.M. Alexander was born in Tasmania in 1869 and died in London in 1956. An American physical education expert, in editing the writings of Alexander, entitled the book *The Resurrection of the Body*.

When Alexander arrived in Melbourne in the 1890's he took up with enthusiasm dramatic recitals for which he had some histrionic skills. His career became clouded when he developed a crippling hoarseness. Medical advice proposed he give up his stage career. With his country training in resourcefulness and a strong measure of assertiveness Alexander decided to set out to cure himself.

Alexander made a striking observation. He placed himself into the appropriate posture for dramatic recital, and, at the same time, decided to observe himself in a long mirror. The comparison was striking—the posture he perceived himself to be making was not, in fact, what appeared in the mirror. There was a mis-match between his proprioceptive sense and his visual input. His sense of muscle action and body position and posture was defective.

Alexander then began to experiment on himself to direct attention to his muscles and his posture, to stop patterns of muscle actions (over-contractions) that were associated with his hoarseness and to allow more reflex control of muscles to occur. The effect of his observations led to an increase in height and widening across the shoulders with easier breathing, amongst other effects. There is some interesting physiology here which is not entirely relevant to this learned assembly.

Alexander developed his findings into a corpus of teaching which he developed in Sydney and then brought to London. He made a considerable impression on members of the acting and other performing arts professions in relieving them of musculoskeletal problems.

Alexander also made an impact on the scientific profession since his observations were factual and not embellished with speculative theorising—John Dewey, the educational philosopher; Sir Charles Sherrington, Nobel Laureate and father of 20th century physiology; Niko Tinbergen, Nobel Laureate and ethologist.

F.M. Alexander is an example of a layman able to make insightful, empirically-based observations that have led to developing useful concepts; that the brain is an imperfect organ in which visual and mental activities overwhelm other senses. In the case of the proprioceptive sense this leads to musculoskeletal problems and to a sense of being “disconnected” between mind and body. In providing a process for re-establishing this connection, Alexander engineered a “resurrection”.

David Garlick

—David Garlick, 12 July 200