



Ann Sickels Mathews In Her Own Words

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Feature: Ann Sickels Mathews In Her Own Words

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by Ann Sickels Mathews, Elizabeth Huebner, and Phyllis G. Richmond

This article is based on interviews conducted by Elizabeth Huebner in 2005 and Phyllis Richmond in 2006 and 2007, plus additional material written by Ann Mathews.

First Lessons

Elizabeth Huebner: Ann, what do you remember about your first hands-on experience?

Ann Mathews: My very first lesson was in London in March 1979, when I was visiting Troup’s daughter Christine, while she was training with Patrick Macdonald. She invited me to visit the class, and I thought I’d better take a lesson first. I was a little intimidated to go and visit the class right off, so I booked with Mr. Macdonald.

EH: What was that like?

AM: I was confused. The magic of the hands didn’t get through to me. I think it was because I was worrying, “Will I be a dumb pupil? Will I know what he wants me to do?” I was so baffled that I couldn’t *not* tighten my neck. We tighten our necks with anxiety, whether we know it or not. He kept saying, “Stay back,” “Don’t let your knees collapse,” “Don’t close your eyes,” “Free your neck,” and I didn’t get it.

That June, Troup and I went back to Macdonald’s class with my daughter Sioux and her friend, Anna. The students worked in a circle, in pairs, depending on their level of advancement. Mr. Macdonald either gave an individual turn or worked with the pairs. I could see what was happening all around me, but I was still not getting it when they worked on me.

I could see Sioux, Troup, and Anna being guided in and out of the chair. I thought that they looked more graceful than I’d ever seen them. The movement looked as if it must be a fundamental way of folding and unfolding. It had an unmistakable simple human grace. Troup struggled a bit because he’d lost his leg in the war and wore a prosthesis. It had no ankle flexion and wouldn’t go exactly right, but the head and neck and the rest of the spine were beautiful. I had

certainly never seen Troup and the two girls move like that. It was quite an extraordinary Alexander experience. I thought, “I’ve got to study this. I’m having a lot of trouble with it, but clearly I can see there’s something to discover here.”

I went back as many times as I could, and when I came home the second time, I was determined to find a local Alexander teacher. I had heard about Aileen Crow, so I started right in. This was about the time Troup started training at ACAT (the American Center for the Alexander Technique). Some months later, I joined him, Missy Vineyard, Pearl Ausubel, and others; we all graduated in 1975.

Major Influences

EH: Who would you say were your primary teachers, or those who had a big influence on you?

AM: I spent a month at Misha Magidov’s class each of the three years my daughter Stuyvie was in training with him. I loved his work, and his students had a sureness and skill that I marveled at. I

realized that I needed further study, so when people like Misha, Nellie Ben-Or, Rivka Cohen, or Patrick Macdonald came to New York, I’d take some lessons. And when we started our school, Shaiké Hermelin came from Tel Aviv for two weeks twice a year for a number of years. I loved his work, and so did all our students; but I never understood how the Macdonald people got that head/spine connection till I worked with Tom Lemens.

Tom Lemens was a major influence. At that time, my pupils were all improving, but when I put hands on the head and neck, I didn’t know what I was

supposed to feel, or might indeed be able to feel, I just went through the motions. So, I worked for years with Tom in order to understand and to experience the Macdonald way of working. It kept eluding me until one day when I took Jed Diamond, who

was a student in our school, for a supervised lesson with Tom. Tom worked on him, taking him in and out of the chair, with my hands sandwiched between his hands and Jed’s head and neck, and suddenly I got it. The direction in Tom’s hands was so strong and clear, and I could feel it reaching its target in Jed’s body. We did this many times. I was a non-doing participant, but we were all feeling the same thing. When we got back to class, I worked on it with Jed until the sending and receiving were clearly working. That was so exciting, so satisfying.

EH: I love how open you are about learning from others. You’ve gone about learning in a very open-hearted, open-minded way.

AM: It’s so much more fun that way!

EH: Who else were your primary influences?

AM: Troup and I spent two weeks at the Carringtons’ refresher course right after graduating and again the next year and after that whenever we were in London. I feel Walter was a very wise man, a searching thinker. I find myself quoting things he said over and over again, particularly with the students in training, but also with private pupils.



Ann Sickels Mathews

“Are you in a position of mechanical advantage to do what you're about to do? Are your directions going? Are you comfortable?”

I remember him asking a student in a workshop in London, “Are you happy in your Monkey?” It seemed an odd little thing to say, “Are you happy in your Monkey?” but he pointed out that if you’re thinking, “I wouldn’t like to stay here,” it’s very important to find out why you’re not happy in the Monkey and what you’re missing that needs to change. Now it’s part of my teaching: Are you in a position of mechanical advantage to do what you’re about to do? Are your directions going? Are you comfortable? And that comes from “Are you happy in your Monkey?” If you answer “yes” to the first, “yes” to the second, and “no” to the third, go back and look at the other two. I can still hear Walter’s voice saying, “Are you happy in your Monkey?”

I had a memorable lesson with Peggy Williams in London. In the table lesson, she had both my legs extended, and she took my right leg, which is my slightly shorter, tighter leg. She just held my foot, taking the leg out, and inviting it to lengthen. I thought, “Well, that’s nice, and now she’s going to put it up and go on to other things.” But she stayed there. I thought, “That’s very nice, so now what is she going to do?” and she just stayed there.

Nobody else had ever simply stayed there quietly holding my leg with a faint little direction, like a magnet. And it occurred to me, “Perhaps I haven’t completely let her have the leg. Well, I’ll direct myself to release whatever may need to be released.”

Gradually I felt the leg getting longer and longer and longer, and my mental image was that it was catching up with the other leg. “Now it’s a centimeter longer, now it’s a half an inch longer, now it must be an inch longer!” Of course it wasn’t literally catching up with the other leg, but I could feel it easing into length, and that revealed to me how incompletely I had been releasing.

This slowing down with the continuing direction of the teacher, just quietly waiting, was a revelation, and I thought, “Maybe I’ve been rushing. I need to slow down and give tissues time to respond to the invitation to lengthen.”

Leg Balance

EH: I’ve heard you mention leg balance several times. Can you talk about that?

AM: I had a major experience that opened my eyes: Dilys Carrington balanced my leg. No teacher had ever balanced my leg before, as far as I knew. I was astonished. In awe, I said to Dilys, “I think you’ve balanced my leg,” as if she’d done something as difficult as balancing a pencil on its end. She smiled and said, “But of course!” And I thought, “If she is saying ‘of course,’ then I’d better learn about this. I’d better puzzle it out.” And pretty soon I could find the balance myself, and this changed my teaching.

A position of balance is one of non-doing. To be a bit off is basically to be holding a position against gravity, whether we realize it or not, and that forces us to make “undue effort.” Clearly, this doesn’t make sense in something we call Rest Position. I soon began to notice that some teachers placed my leg in balance, but most didn’t, and students in training had to be taught—how to find it for themselves, how to find it in others, and how to teach pupils to find it for themselves. It seems that we share a level of tension that makes us not notice and not care. I think it’s a glaring gap in Alexander practice worldwide.

I have made discoveries about this in little increments over the years. One thing I discovered by experimenting was that if you put the feet very close to the pelvis and only as far apart as the hip joints, they are in a standing position, stable, grounded through the heel spontaneously, and much less likely to wobble out of balance. Many teachers tell you to direct the knees away, and that’s fine with me, but if you’re also holding against gravity and don’t even know it, as I used to do, there’s something wrong.

EH: It’s almost impossible in that position for the foot not to be grounded because the shin is so directly over the foot. When you did it to me, I felt almost as if I were standing on my feet, even though I was lying down.

AM: Your legs are nice and free at the hip joint and easy for me to balance. There can be two problems in learning to

balance one’s own legs or others’ legs. Some pupils can’t let you have the leg 100%. I get chided for this myself occasionally. You have to get rid of the holding before you can possibly balance a leg, and for some pupils this can be very difficult. The other problem is the tight, inelastic outer thigh muscle, very common in men and in ballet dancers. There are ways to work to change this, but it takes time.

What I teach students to do at home is to lie in semi-supine with the legs leaning gently together. This is to establish zero effort, because balance involves zero effort. If their legs start to fall out, they soon realize that the base is too narrow. I have them toe out a centimeter, then slide heels out a centimeter, and repeat until they have both legs completely relaxed and leaning slightly in. You don’t want to tolerate any kind of holding or any kind of shifting out of symmetry. Later, I teach them to bring their feet closer together after a while, very gradually, in the same way. They’ll find that the relaxed legs will separate a centimeter, maybe an inch or two, into balance. But they didn’t *do* it; it was an indirect procedure. They feel all of a piece, every part resting, and directed up from the soles of the feet to the top of the head. Eventually the pupil can tell immediately if the legs are not being held and can rest in balance. If they’re having trouble with this, I recommend that they extend one leg and with their hand or hands, tip the bent leg slightly to the right and then to the left, not more than half an inch in each direction, looking for balance. It takes a while for them to feel the leg beginning to go in and out of balance. Once you can find balance here, you can find it everywhere. You become a balancing organism.

On Squatting

EH: You choose to work with students lying in semi-supine on the floor, not on a table. And you are often in a squat while you work with them on the floor. Why do you work this way?

AM: In 1984 I wrote the thesis for my Masters Degree in early childhood education at Bank Street College, and the floor work grew out of that. The subject was a two-year project teaching the Alexander principles to children in a public school class. Among other things, I had to give 20 little floor turns in 25

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minutes, so I had no time to waste. I figured out what kind of a little turn I could give them working with the head and neck and shoulders, then lengthening the spine by going into Table Top Monkey and lifting them delicately by the knees. I came to see how indispensable squatting is for economy of effort.

EH: Will you say more about the importance of squatting even when economy is not a prime objective?

AM: Humans move in all kinds of ways. We stand, sit, lie down, squat, kneel, sit cross-legged, we can use all kinds of positions life long, if we keep using them. Our primary positions aside from lying down are standing and squatting. Monkey and sitting are part way down on the continuum from standing to fully folding into squat, but most Westerners look down on squatting as primitive. We have pretty much given it up in favor of sitting in chairs, thus thoughtlessly eliminating one of our primary positions. But the body needs full folding. It becomes clearer and clearer to me that the basic positions are “fitness vitamins” for the human being.

EH: In what way?

AM: In the sense of being indispensable for optimum fitness. Every basic position demands a slightly different use of the muscles, some stretching, some resting, and some contracting. If we want to use the whole human instrument beautifully, we need a daily repertoire of varied movement—and I don’t mean working out—to keep our bodies elastic and strong. We don’t need to get compulsive about this, but just to take advantage of all opportunities to use the full range of human movement and positions with some regularity. Some teachers might say this is just body mechanics. But life is in one sense body mechanics, and, when guided by the Alexander Directions, so very much more. Using the basic positions is not the Alexander Technique. The Alexander Technique is philosophy, psychology, a mental and operational model for how we approach anything and everything we do, including reclaiming lost function like basic positions.

EH: In your F.M. Alexander Memorial Address (for the full text of this talk see *AmSAT News* #74, Summer 2007), you described how you found it impossible to squat on the whole foot.

How did you relearn it and teach it to others?

AM: As I discovered, anyone can squat comfortably on a steep enough slope. I had wooden wedges, 18”x15”x4”, built for our school and for all the rooms at NYU where I teach in the Graduate Acting Program. Many of the students start trying to squat as I did, with heels up, others have their whole foot on the floor but with the two feet placed wide apart, toes pointing way out, not aligned with knees. Others hunch way over. These solutions, like mine with heels up, reflect our bodies’ instinctive keeping of the balance, which is commendable, but practicing a warped squat does more harm than good, and it’s highly uncomfortable.

When using a wedge, as I did, one can ease out the Achilles tendons by rocking gently back and forth enough so that eventually one can fold all the way to the squat without it. It can take months. But when you can squat comfortably, with or without the wedge, an interesting thing happens: You naturally release the head and neck. The body stays balanced, the neck is free, the head forward and up, the back lengthening and widening, all without any coaching or hands-on. (I rarely interfere with this and save my hands-on for the chair work.) Clearly it is instinctive. There is an exception to this from time to time:

If the pupil is trying really hard to “get it right,” and often you can tell this by his expression, that will tighten the neck and throw things off. Also, if knees are painful or there has been some damage to a leg, it may not be possible to squat or wise to try.

EH: If we have learned to do a beautifully directed stand/sit, why do we need to squat, even if the ankle flexion would make stand/sit easier and more economical?

AM: We are all interested in back lengthening. In the squat, the pelvis is dangling from the head, instead of having to support all the weight above as it does in sitting. Gravity is thus constantly lengthening the spine, as Nature intended, so that the anti-gravity response helps to organize our head, neck, and

upper back. So we’re lengthening in both directions at once.

EH: How does the ability to squat help our customary chair work?

AM: First of all, optimal ankle flexion makes sitting down infinitely easier. But even before that has been achieved, sitting should simply be an interruption, a way stop, on the continuum of stand to Monkey to squat. The key to this is to keep the sense of balance that functions automatically when one has the idea of going all the way to the squat. We are used to giving it up at the last minute as we sit, and this can color our idea of sitting for a very long time. I frequently play a little game with students where they know I might or might not remove the stool behind them. That soon teaches them to include balance with their directions.

This brings to mind the last time I was at Lansdowne Road, in May 2000. Walter was doing chair work with one student at a time, and I was standing next to him doing the same. Over and over I heard him say, “Release the knees from the mid-back. Feel the stretch from mid-back to back of knees.” This seemed a much more inclusive phrase than the “back back” which is commonly said. I use that image to help them make the connection from stand/squat to stand/sit.

EH: Do you actually prefer to work on the floor to working on the table?

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AM: Yes. There is so much more variety both for me and for the pupil. For example, I can lift people by

the knees to release the lower back, which I can’t do on the table. And it’s both more challenging and more comfortable for me. In table work you step left, you step right, and you lunge. In floor work you have the whole continuum of folding and unfolding as you squat and rise, sit back on your heels, rise onto your knees and so on. But it is a lot more demanding, so I vary it with table work when I have many lessons in a row. Monkey is, of course, indispensable and I use it all day long, but in my teaching it is simply part of the continuum. I tend not to use the term Monkey as I feel it gives a static image and doesn’t evoke the grace that the

position has. I wonder what other teachers think about that.

When I teach trainees and teachers, it's a bit of a shock to see how easily some of them lose their primary directions when they're trying to master change of position or a new position. It is essential to learn to keep one's directions going. Life involves the constant daily challenge of changing positions; so teaching this way is more like everyday life.

Self-Awareness

EH: I'm interested to know about your thought process when giving a lesson. What is the inner dialogue going on for you while you are giving a private lesson?

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AM: My absolute top priority is the awareness of self, and as I sense my directions fading, I go back to them over and over and over.

EH: What is your way of attending to yourself?

AM: I take a moment of quietness before I start. For instance, when I'm about to start a floor lesson, I stand at the head, with my feet just behind the pupil's head. I feel a very strong pull to start to fold and go down there and get to work. Long ago I realized that this is a key time to inhibit. I don't know why I feel this temptation to start immediately. By stopping, I can feel the pull to end-gain. I soon realized that this is an important moment to not give my consent and to be simply standing there, going up, with a free neck. As soon as I have that re-established, I fold at the knees, hips, and ankles to go down. I like to observe the directions happening all the way down. That comes quite naturally, but when changing positions, I must keep my focus on directing.

EH: Once you have your hands on a pupil, then what?

AM: First, I direct as I put neutral, uncommitted hands on. Then I move the head with my fingers ever so slightly, looking for the end of the spine via the head, renewing my direction with intention to share it with the pupil. He soon can feel that subtle change. If he is sitting, I think the head away from the

pelvis, but when he's standing, I think the head away from both pelvis and feet—an elastic connection from the head all the way down to the feet. If I have got this connection to the pupil, the next thing is to take him into the chair without losing the connection. Sometimes I lose it partway down. But if I'm really working well with the pupil, he will know exactly where I lost it, and I will know that he knows it because we talk about it. "Did you notice that I lost you a third of the way down?" The student says, "Yeah, I did, but that was OK, it came back." I

say, "It's not OK. It's not terrible, but it's not OK, so let's see if we can get a better connection." Sometimes they take their own tempo and fold too fast for me to stay with my

responsibility to give them a delicate but palpable direction all the way down, so I ask them to think *andante* rather than *allegro*.

Then I get the better connection. "Can you feel the difference?" "Absolutely." They look surprised. That sort of thing was never discussed in any lesson I ever took with anybody, but I think it's fun. It's part of the fun. Don't assume that you'll always do everything to perfection. We try as best we can, but there will be moments that are perfection, other moments that miss perfection. I want students to be alert to nuances and differences, and I think that noticing the teacher should not be off-bounds.

Arm Spiral

EH: Would you talk about why you take the arms way above the head when you do your floor work?

AM: I do it with table work too, and the procedure is the same. Most of the time we move our arms below the shoulders. But we still have all the brachial structure that other primates use to swing from branch to branch, which doesn't get used unless we do a lot of swimming, tennis, rock climbing, dance, or other such activities. Most of us don't do activities like these, so we lose the full range of movement.

EH: So what you're saying is that we don't reach, we don't extend ourselves in an upward reach.

AM: That's right. This procedure came from Troup's explorations after he read Professor Dart's paper on the spiral musculature. He was working on me on the table and he said, "Let me see if I can take your arm into a spiral." He had one hand on either side of my elbow joint, one above the joint and one below it, and he took my arm above my head, parallel to the table. I felt it lengthen down into the shoulder, past the shoulder, and down into the torso, deep down into the torso. He did this very slowly, and it felt like a revelation. I could picture the ribs spreading apart. I could feel this very gentle, very slow, very gradual release of the latissimus dorsi, and I realized how little I used that muscle. It just had a dull life—like feet in shoes walking on hard flat surfaces all the time have a dull life, compared to going barefoot.

The spiral pull is relevant to what we are teaching, because it gets into the part of the torso that people habitually slump into. As the ribcage very gently opens out, the breathing begins to be freer and fuller. It seems to facilitate changes that need to happen.

As a teacher, it is essential to have your pull be an indirect pull, so that you're just connected to the pupil, leaning back ever so slightly, not tightening your arms. Gravity is taking you away, so that it's the indirect pull of gravity that acts on the pupil. Once Troup was working on me and hadn't room to lean back. I didn't know that, but I felt he was simply pulling me and it didn't have the same effect at all. He slid the table farther away from the wall, did what he usually did, and all was well.

If you are working with the student on the floor, you kneel or squat, making sure you're comfortable, take the arm overhead parallel to the floor, then lean ever so slightly back and let gravity do the work. You are not doing, but simply directing yourself, and you hardly have to hold onto the arm. It's important to keep the pull steady and to be patient. More information comes in when you work slowly. It is a big stretch involving the arm in a slight spiral, the latissimus dorsi all the way to its insertion in the lower back, and on to the muscles of the floor of the pelvis. But this will not happen completely in the beginning unless your pupil has very stretchy tissues. NEVER PULL. That will have the opposite effect to what you want.

With some people there seems to be no release. But you never know. I worked with a conductor early on in my teaching career. I was taking the arm into the spiral stretch, and I felt no elasticity and was about to quit when he said, "It feels as if my arm could go all the way to the kitchen." He was experiencing release even though I didn't pick it up. Some people seem very stretchy, some are moderately stretchy, some not at all—but you never know what it is to them. It is worth hanging in there. For you, it should be like a directed meditation. And no end-gaining.

Never say, "No pain, no gain." If the body sends a pain message, that is its only way of warning you that you may be doing damage. This is self-protection, telling you the body doesn't like something and to avoid it. So for example, in the spirals, there may be tight muscles that have not been called upon for decades, so you must work slowly and gently. When I first tried leaving my arms extended it hurt unbearably so I used pillows to support them next to the pain range and that was fine. The pain range shrinks over time. Having pupils lie in Rest Position using pillows to support the extended arm will facilitate release. One seventy year old cellist's arms wouldn't go anywhere near parallel to the floor so I had him pile up pillows in Rest Position for months and after some months he only needed a low one. And he said that his tone was profoundly richer with much less of the undue effort he was used to making.

Teaching at NYU

EH: You've talked about your love of teaching at the Graduate Acting Program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Tell us about the program. What makes it so special?

AM: The talented, skilled faculty, who are a delight to collaborate with, an extraordinary student body, a chairman, Zelda Fichandler, whom we trust, love, and admire—and I could go on and on. We select 18 students each year out of many hundreds, and the program is three years long. I am their first Alexander teacher, in once-a-week, hour-long classes of four or five, supplemented by

weekly 15-minute lessons. I have 12 weeks to turn them into committed Alexander students. In the spring term they have private lessons with Kim Jessor, the following fall with Mona Stiles, and that spring back to classes and lessons with me. Kim and Mona also do production support for second- and third-year plays. It's a system that works, but it's been a 20-year challenge to make the few hours we're given truly connect to each and every student. Gone are the days when I used to tell myself that we win some and we lose some. No way, not good enough. The challenge is how to make each student observant, curious, experimental, communicative, diligent, and excited about the work. I go for broke every time.

EH: What did you do in class to help them become observant, experimental, and excited about the work?

AM: For many years I've assigned Michael Gelb's *Body Learning* to be read before they enter the program. It's such a good book. It gets them started thinking and wondering about all the possibilities that are inherent in change, which most have not thought about. My approach in the early classes is to engage them in activity that will flesh out the Alexander theories they have been reading about. Here are three explorations:

1. Force of Habit

I have the group watch one student at a time sit and stand in side view, noticing the changing relationship of head to spine. At first they either don't see or can't describe the head tilting back and down, nor does the individual student being observed notice it. Once someone spots it, one might expect the following students to avoid this, to *not do* it, but that rarely happens, or, if it does, the movement from stand to sit looks stiff and forced.

I then have each student melt a hand onto the back of his or her own neck and look up at the ceiling. They will all be

able to feel the compression of the head back on the spine. Next, I ask them to come slowly to standing with the hand still there. This will enable them to accomplish the movement without the shortening or, if they are still pulling the head back, to feel it happening and let it go, or repeat the movement and *not do* it.

In the discussion I point out that our primary pattern of stand-squat-stand does not elicit this shortening, that the neck tends to free up to let the head go forward and up, the back to lengthen and widen, the body to keep its balance. The shortening is a widespread response to the idea of sitting; that is, of transferring our weight to something behind us which we cannot see, the body giving up its balance in the process. This will be followed, in later classes and lessons, by working with squatting on the wedges.

2. Undue Effort

What is better about Directed movement? Why bother, since *habit* is getting us there?

I have students lean forward in the chair until they sense that the next degree forward will take them off their sit-bones and onto their feet. Pause there. Deliberately tip the head back, make the transfer of

weight onto the feet, rising not more than an inch, i.e., not standing, which some can't resist doing. This must be done SLOWLY, not using momentum, so they can notice the alarming amount of effort that their former momentum was masking. They would prefer to stay with the habit of using momentum, so I ask them to go back to the same point, before the weight shift. This time, think of releasing the neck to allow the head to rotate forward, which lengthens the neck. Then think of allowing the lengthening to continue down the rest of the spine. They will now be looking at the floor. Make the shift slowly forward onto the feet, pause there, and then move back to sitting. The difference in amount and quality of effort will not be lost on them. It is dramatic.

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3. Direction

Is it innate, natural to the organism, or never present unless we impose it?

I ask students to assume their most familiar, relaxed, comfortable position in the chair and look around at each other to see if that looks natural. It always does. Then I ask them all to come to standing, not bothering with how they do it. Look again at each other. Ask them why they suppose that none of them has chosen the same curved spine that they favor when sitting. They report that it just happened that way, that they would find it less comfortable to stand curved than to straighten up, that the curved back is usually supported by the back of the chair, that it would be harder to balance when standing with the collapse, etc. I then make the point that we seem to make an unconscious choice to (more or less) direct the spine when standing, as we learned to do in infancy, but that we have given it up somewhere along the line when sitting. Now our job is to retrain the postural muscles through conscious direction when sitting learning gradually to be independent of the chair back. We all did this, starting soon after birth; it took us four months and no one had to help us. It's all in the wiring; it just has to be reawakened.

Advice to New Teachers

EH: What advice would you give to new Alexander teachers?

AM: Squat, squat, and more squat. Use whatever slope you need to satisfy your sense of organization and direction completely. And it's got to be comfortable. I want my students to question if it's not comfortable. The thing is, their idea of what is comfortable is going to change.

At our Alexander school I've taught my trainees to check at all times if their directions are going when they are

teaching. Then check: "Am I in a position of mechanical advantage? Do I wish I were a little closer to the person or a little farther from the person?" If so, change your positioning right now; your body will tell you what to do. And third, "Am I comfortable?" If you answered "yes" to the first two and "no" to the third, go back and look at the first two again.

So often when you're learning to pick people up by the knees in the floor work, for example, you get into position, you even get the legs up on your wrists, and your body says, "You could lever

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this up easier if you were an inch forward." Or the body will say, "You can do it from here, but you'd really like to be a half an inch backward." You don't know that in advance. Each student is a different shape and size than the one before him. So I've learned to use that moment as a challenge to stay directed as I move the feet farther apart or closer together, or closer to the student, until my body says, "OK, this is where I want to be. I'm comfortable and ready to lift."

EH: You're weightbearing when you do that, so it's important that you be in a good mechanical position.

AM: You bet, I'm five feet tall and a lot of the people I'm lifting up are six feet or more!

EH: Talking with you, it is so clear that you love the Alexander Technique, love talking about it, teaching it, learning it, living it.

AM: I love working with people, problem solving, and making discoveries.

And there are still lots of discoveries to make out there. It is always challenging, always fascinating!

Ann Sickels Mathews (ACAT, 1975) studied piano from age five through college and singing for many years thereafter. She has a BA from Sarah Lawrence College and an MS in Early Childhood Education from Bank Street College of Education, where she wrote her thesis: Implications for Education in the Work of F.M. Alexander: An Exploratory Project In a Public School Classroom. She was Co-Director of the Mathews School for the Alexander Technique from 1984 to 2004 and was on the faculty of the Graduate Acting Program of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts from 1986 to 2007.

Elizabeth Huebner has been practicing the Alexander Technique since 1981. She founded the Connecticut Center for the Alexander Technique in 2001. In 2007 Ms. Huebner presented at the AmSAT national meeting, was featured on two radio programs, was guest lecturer at Windham Hospital and the University of Connecticut, and is working on a CD. She maintains a private practice, conducts workshops, and works with actors at the University of Connecticut and The Hartt School.

Phyllis G. Richmond trained with John Nicholls, graduating in 1991. She has taught in North Texas since 1991. She currently teaches at the University of North Texas and the University of Texas at Arlington, and she maintains a private teaching practice in Dallas and Arlington. She has written extensively about the Alexander Technique and the performing arts. Phyllis is the Editor of AmSAT News.

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Photo of Ann Mathews by Sioux Eagle.

From the AmSAT News Team

The AmSAT News Team offers special thanks to Christine Stevens for her assistance with this issue.

We are pleased to welcome Michelle Obrecht to the Team. Michelle trained in California with Ed and Linda Avak, graduating in 1991. Since 1999, she has taught privately in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and at the University of Michigan. She is teacher-in-residence at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theater, and Dance.