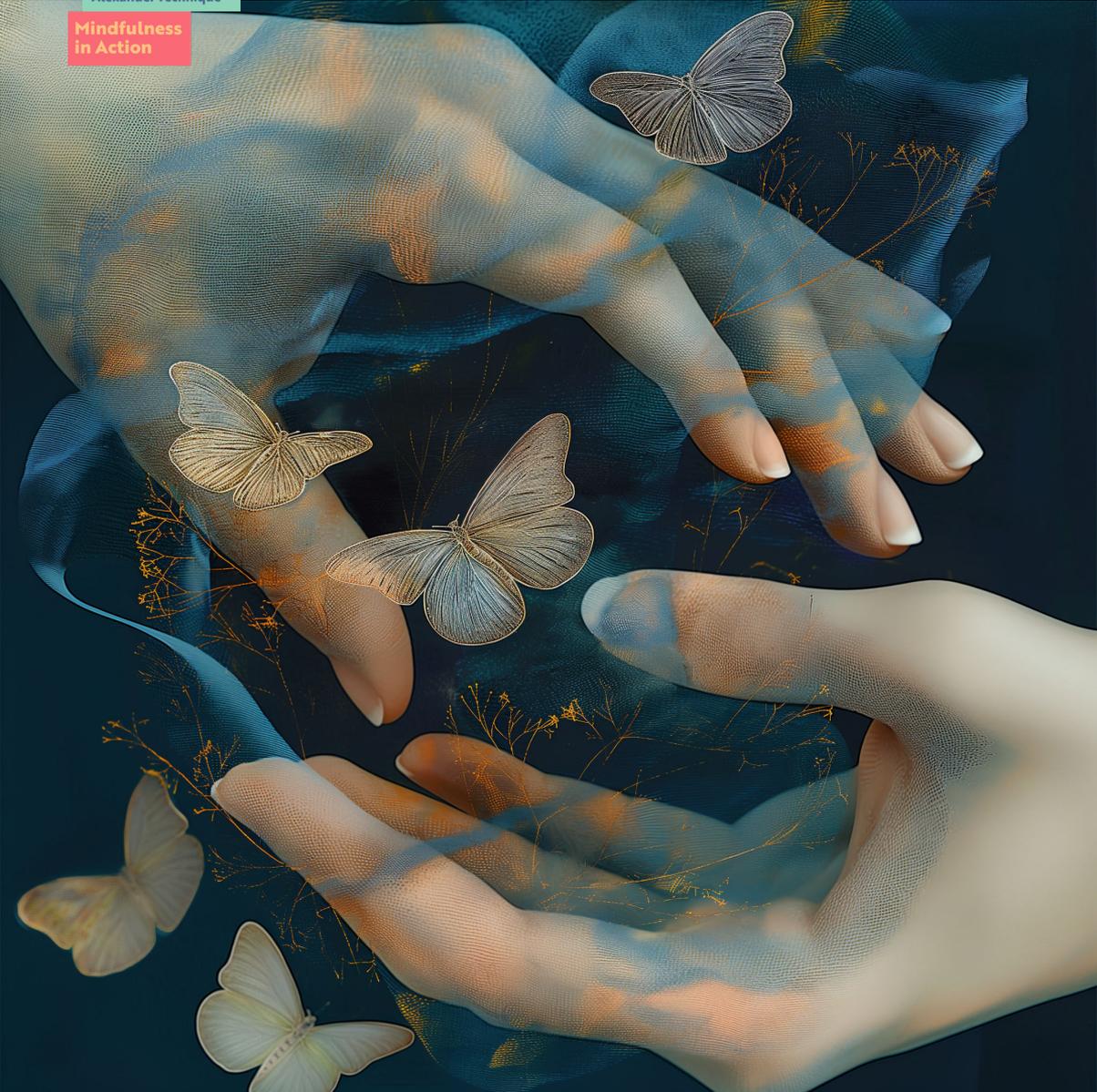




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It Takes a Village

A Student's Journey with More Than One Teacher

RUTH ROOTBERG AND ROY REGOZIN

Ruth:

THIS IS A STORY OF LEARNING, growth, and discovery—for the teacher and student.

Roy Regozin had read an Alexander Technique book in his early adulthood, but it didn't mean much to him because he didn't experience it with the help of a teacher. The same was true as he read about and tried yoga and tai chi. Roy used his keen mind professionally as a lawyer. He was adept, healthy, and active.

After he retired, Roy and his family left Long Island, New York, and moved to Western Massachusetts about five years before I met him. He continued to commute monthly to New York City to lunch with former colleagues and friends.

In his seventies, his spine gave way to kyphosis, osteoporosis, and back pain, and although he did not know it at the time, he suspects symptoms of Parkinson's disease were beginning to emerge. His friend Gordon recommended that Roy try the Alexander Technique, but this time with a teacher.

When I met Roy in Spring 2017, he was still walking his dogs. But over the summer, his lower back problems became much worse. By fall, he had begun walking thirty minutes daily on a treadmill, holding onto the siderails for support, and could no longer take walks outdoors. He continued to drive his car.

Roy quickly became enamored with the Alexander Technique and usually came for lessons twice a week. With his kyphotic curve, lower lumbar pain, and stiffness, he could not lie flat on the table. We experimented with his lying on his belly, but that negated working much on his head and neck. For several months, he sat in a zigzag garden chair, which meant we did not work on sit to stand. Eventually, he was able to return to the table on his back but with modifications. Books were stacked high under his head. I made two wedges on the table with lots of pillows: one for his neck and back and the other for his knees.

When having a chair turn, Roy was always surprisingly able to rise forward and up to standing. He re-learned walking with his arms swinging in contralateral fashion, something that had disappeared as symptoms of Parkinson's arose. In Roy's words, "I didn't know I wasn't swinging my arms, and when you asked me to allow them to swing, I had no idea how to summon up that action." The first times we worked on it, he gave himself mental orders to move the arms in opposition to his legs, and I watched him determinedly place his arms, but it had nothing to do with free shoulder movement that would allow the arms to swing. When he started using walking sticks on occasion to support his balance, he had to really work on figuring out which arm should move when. Since then, there has been some natural coordination and contralateral movement developing.

Roy was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in July 2019. As we write this story some four and a half years later, he is still in a fairly early stage, but it has affected him—his balance for a start. A tremor has been primarily isolated to his left arm, and only occasionally presents during a lesson. His voice, already soft, became weaker as his symptoms appeared. His face lost expression. He has reported to me that he sometimes freezes—can't move—when walking at home. When the freezing began, it created a new obstacle, especially when he approached a doorway or small space. (I have never witnessed him freeze as he enters my house or the teaching room or walks through my open-plan first floor.) Now, his major obstacle at home has become turning around. It doesn't matter how much space there is surrounding him; it's always very difficult. It's a big deal for him to move from his desk to a filing cabinet and back again.

Over the summer of 2022, Roy suffered from a new complication: his lower legs swelled, probably an effect of a drug he was taking for the osteoporosis. He also could fall asleep standing. He had to stop driving, so he got rides to lessons. Fortunately, after discontinuing the medication, the swelling dissipated, but only after several months. He has not yet resumed driving.

Roy has always been a joy to work with: he arrives with questions or reports of what he's been thinking, what he's been working on. If I loan him a book, he borrows it and then buys a copy for himself. His mind remains sharp, and he has a keen sense of humor, full of puns.

Over the years, Roy has become very responsive to my words and hands. He knows mentally what to think and earnestly sends his messages. He was single-minded, insisting that he was only capable of thinking one direction at

a time. So, if he thought of his neck, he couldn't think of his torso at the same time. Or if he thought about lengthening in a general way, he could perceive a change, but if I asked him to think of lengthening his spine and widening his shoulders, that was a problem. It seemed that expanding his attention to include two body parts simultaneously was the obstacle, and the problem increased the farther away the parts were from each other. Roy, ever an assiduous reader, recognized that his problem had been described by Alexander:

My daily teaching experience shows me that in working for a given end, we can all project one direction, but to continue to give this direction as we project the second, and to continue to give these two while we add a third, and to continue to keep the three directions going as we proceed to gain the end, has proved to be the *pons asinorum* of every pupil I have so far known.¹

Another confounding thought experiment for Roy was to think of a body part and of his surroundings at the same time. I wondered whether his habitual way of using his mind as a lawyer prevented him from branching out, expanding his field of attention, expanding his capacity to direct. We continued to work on these issues, but there didn't seem to be much change.

A few years ago, I made a series of short audio recordings for my students. There was one that I called "accumulation" in which I asked the listener to think of the neck, the neck and head, the neck and head and torso, etc. The recordings helped Roy to some extent, but as he said, they didn't put him "over the hump." He often stated that he wished he could help himself in the same way I could help him. I continued to encourage him: "It will come, with time." I told him that he might always go farther during a lesson, but that his ability to rely on his thinking would also grow.

But I didn't really know what more was needed beyond what I had been offering him. I didn't know whether time, trust in the process, an increased skill in my hands, a different thought, different image, different wording, or something else would move him forward. We were both gratified that at least

¹ F.M. Alexander, "Evolution of a Technique," in *The Use of the Self* (London: Orion, 2001, [1932]), 42. The footnote attached to this quote is "The phrase 'all together, one after the other' expresses the idea of combined activity I wish to convey here."

he had relief and insight at each lesson, and that his responsiveness to my hands and words continued to deepen.

I travel frequently and sometimes take long breaks from teaching. Within a few months of our first lessons together, I referred Roy to two other teachers to study with during my absence. Betsy Polatin was a couple of hours away, and Missy Vineyard, my training director and beloved teacher, was in close proximity to Roy and me at that time.

When the COVID pandemic struck and I stopped teaching in person, Roy declined my offer of experimenting with online instruction. I suggested he try instead some group lectures Ted Dimon was offering through Zoom.

Roy has continued taking instruction with these three teachers, sometimes only when I am not available to teach in person, but in some cases, concurrently while we continue our work together.

Roy gained much from each teacher I recommended. After a few lessons with Betsy, Roy's lower back released, and that was when he became able to lie on his back for a table turn, albeit with lots of supportive pillows. His ability to lie in this modified semi-supine opened up tremendous possibilities for our work together and subsequently led to more changes. It also meant he could lie down at home, which has become an important part of his work on himself. After returning to teaching another time, I was especially impressed with his increased ability to release his hips; he had been introduced to some Dart work in Ted's classes. And because of his study with Missy and Betsy during my absences, Roy never slipped back into older habits.

I knew Roy understood from our lessons that his thought was instrumental to any change within him. Missy provided more context, explaining some brain science to him, and helped Roy experience the power of his mind.

One day he arrived at his lesson with me and reported how he had briefly controlled the tremor in his left hand and arm while at a lesson with Missy. Missy had suggested the tremor was occurring because his brain was sending alternate nerve impulses, first to contract muscles in his arm and immediately to stop contracting. She asked Roy to consciously inhibit by telling his brain to stop doing that. He did, and the tremors stopped for a short period, then resumed. The point had been made: to some extent, Roy, if he chose to do so, could consciously inhibit, and the tremors would cease.

During another session, Missy asked Roy to tell himself for several minutes that he did not have Parkinson's disease. After doing so, he felt less heavy, less

pulled down, lighter, more expansive. Missy said the mind often conforms to expectations, unless otherwise directed. By inserting the “positive no”² (i.e., I do *not* have Parkinson’s disease), Roy temporarily stopped his mind from supporting the symptoms he had come to habitually expect from having Parkinson’s.

Roy also deepened his work on thinking *Up* while working with Missy. Since I trained with her, Missy has shifted her meaning of *Up*. It is no longer “from tail bone towards head and beyond” but rather “away from the earth and its gravitational pull.” Roy is still working on thinking *Up* consistently enough to find and re-find the lightness he experiences during lessons, and I am careful to distinguish whether I am asking him to think up through his body or up from gravity.

About a year ago, Roy mentioned how difficult it was to pass through the narrow gap from my teaching room entrance to the side of the table we always used for him to lie down and get up. (It was only possible for him to maneuver into lying down from one side of the table; his spine will best spiral in only one direction.) He never froze, but it was difficult for him to manage. I could have simply pulled the table farther away from the window or switched out where he would put his head, but instead, I was inspired to experiment. I spent a fairly brief time with him introducing a spatial awareness game that I had learned from Missy while in training. It was called “Bubble,” and during training, we spent several days with it each fall semester. Using *Bubble* becomes a way to manage being in close proximity to another person or object without shrinking. In a very brief exploration, I asked Roy to direct from his center 360 degrees around, allowing for his personal space, beyond his physical edges, to range in size to suit his comfort level, and for this bubble to intersect with people or things, including walls, floors, and ceilings, without his bubble (or another’s) breaking. Roy, his intelligence and willingness ever present, understood the basics instantly, and it transformed him. Not only did he never have the problem in my teaching space again, but he said it was working when he passed through doors and tight spaces at home. We would quip as he moved through a small space: “Bubble, bubble.”

In June 2023, Roy entered a feasibility study with Dr. Liz Charles, a physician living in Devon, England, exploring the impact of “Safe and Sound Protocol”

2 See Missy Vineyard, *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live* (New York: Avalon, 2007), 164–66.

(ssp) ³ on Parkinson's disease. ssp is an algorithm-filtered music program created by Dr. Stephen Porges.⁴ During their Zoom sessions, which typically took place once or twice each week, Dr. Liz talked with Roy about the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and polyvagal theory,⁵ since dysregulation of the ANS is a common feature in Parkinson's disease. Dr. Liz helped Roy to understand more about his own nervous system and tendencies. For short segments, he would listen to the ssp music from an app on his phone while Dr. Liz would quietly observe him and carefully titrate the listening. They discussed his responses before and after listening. Roy was very excited about this new venture and mentioned it frequently over the summer.

In the fall of 2023, I spent an extended time away, during which time I was fortunate to meet Dr. Charles and learn more about her work with ssp. Meanwhile, Roy continued his work with Dr. Liz and Missy.

When I returned, Roy and I worked together for two and a half weeks after Thanksgiving. During the second lesson, he brought up something about how he was lately approaching directing, something about looking, about connecting. I immediately shifted from what we had been doing to support what was on his mind.

Two changes immediately showed up. (1) As I had my hands on his head or neck, I would ask Roy to think of his whole self in general and of a part in particular, and then to ask for that part to release. We started with the neck as the part. He could execute the mental instructions, and he and I could feel the change. I took his arm, repeated, and the same thing occurred. He reported, "I feel my arm is getting lighter." Although Roy is always enthusiastic about the lessons and reports feeling better during and at the conclusion of each lesson,

3 "The Safe and Sound Protocol (ssp) was created by Dr. Stephen Porges and functions as an acoustic vagal nerve stimulator. It is an evidence-based intervention shown to reduce stress and anxiety and improve the well-being of people of all ages." drlizcharles.com/ssp.html. Accessed January 15, 2024.

4 "Stephen W. Porges, PhD is Distinguished University Scientist at Indiana University where he is the founding director of the Traumatic Stress Research Consortium. He is Professor of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina, and Professor Emeritus at both the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Maryland." stephenporges.com/about. Accessed March 22, 2024.

5 Polyvagal theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, emphasizes the role the autonomic nervous system—especially the vagus nerve—plays in regulating our health and behavior. polyvagalinstitute.org/. Accessed March 14, 2024.

there was something different this time. He and I knew that his thought, not just mine, was instrumental in his ability to release. (2) As I asked Roy to turn his attention outward to his surroundings, I could feel him directing.

I was excited and amazed by the changes. Roy had inhibited and directed. I gave him instructions, but he did the thinking, and we both experienced the changes in him. Two days later, he returned for another lesson, and we worked in the same way, with the same outcomes.

I wondered what had occurred that allowed Roy to turn this corner in his learning. In part, I understood he had been working on something Ted had said over a year before plus mulling over ideas Missy had introduced more recently. And in the six months before this new breakthrough, Roy had been having a steady influx of SSP. Something integrated for Roy that brought on the changes I have described.

This is the story from Roy's perspective.

Roy:

WHERE TO BEGIN... My major in college was mathematics, and I went on to earn a graduate degree in that subject. Think *Gulliver's Travels*. I was not as bad as the mathematicians described by Jonathan Swift, but I did live in my head for decades. Becoming a lawyer allowed me to utilize my divided mind and body. I used and took care of my body as if it were a car. My mind "drove" my body without having any substantial idea about how it actually worked, or that I could have any choice in the matter.

When I began to study the Alexander Technique with Ruth, I also began to learn how my muscles and bones interacted. It became apparent that some familiarity with anatomy would enable me to better understand the Technique, and I studied it, but it was for the most part a cognitive exercise. As I found when I had tried to teach myself the Alexander Technique, yoga, and tai chi in my twenties, thirties, and forties, understanding something intellectually did not enable me to actually perform what I thought I understood. It did not give me a "feel" for what was involved in performing these disciplines, and anatomical knowledge did not enable me to free my muscles.

Ruth's hands-on work with me did give me the experience of applying the Alexander Technique and taught me more about my body. With her hands on me, I could access more subtle sensations that told me what areas of my

body were shortening, and I began to learn to let go and lengthen, but on my own, I couldn't distinguish at that subtle level. As I became increasingly more responsive to her directions and suggestions, I still could do little on my own. When Ruth asked me to let my shoulders widen, voilà! When I asked myself, during a lesson or at home, not so much.

From the beginning, Ruth was very clear that directing was not doing. In essence, one made a wish and waited to see if anything happened. In my disembodied frame of mind, I pictured my wish as a bubble of words floating in the air in the vicinity of whatever area of my body I was addressing, which was also floating in the air. It seemed to me to be entirely random whether my wish would make contact with my body.

My difficulties were compounded when Ruth asked me to learn the sequence of directions used to practice the Technique: let my neck be free so that my head can move forward and up, my torso can lengthen and widen, my knees can move forward and away, my heels can release into the ground, my shoulders can widen, and my arms can lengthen. I was able to remember the sequence but had no idea how to apply it. When I tried, I felt like I was mindlessly reciting the words of a prayer.

Working with Betsy Polatin helped me to become more aware of myself. One day, I had a knot in my lower back that was causing some discomfort. I mentioned it to Betsy when we were talking at the beginning of the lesson, probably adding something like, "I don't think it should limit what we do during the lesson." Betsy had me sit down and make myself comfortable. She then told me to begin and continue to pay attention in a caring way to the area in my lower back that was sore, and tell her if anything happened. Within a few minutes, without my doing anything other than paying attention in a caring way, the discomfort had dissipated. So, I recognized that paying attention to myself could be beneficial. During a subsequent lesson, I expressed frustration that our bodies do not come with an owner's manual. Betsy responded that she was working on one. In 2020, *Humanual: A Manual for Being Human*⁶ was published.

With the onset of the pandemic, all in-person lessons were suspended. I did not want to continue with remote lessons because what I had learned the most from was the hands-on experience. Just as she had provided references

6 Betsy Polatin, *Humanual: A Manual for Being Human* (Cardiff, CA: Waterside, 2020).

to me in response to my questions, Ruth suggested that I sit in on a class on Zoom that Ted Dimon was offering through his school, the Dimon Institute. I really enjoyed it and signed up for more. I continued attending lectures online while returning to hands-on lessons with Ruth (at first with masks) as life opened up again.

One aspect of Ted's classes that I particularly appreciated was the inclusion of practice intervals during which Ted would lead the class in actually using what he was teaching, thereby demonstrating how one could go about teaching oneself.

For me, the most enlightening lessons were the ones during which Ted discussed and led practice periods concerning awareness and attention. What follows is what I retained from what I experienced during the classes; it is not a transcript:

When practicing the Technique, it is important to remain aware of your surroundings, so that you don't drift off and get lost in your thoughts. Before you begin, pick something, a tree, a painting, a piece of furniture, that will be in your line of vision, and continue to observe it until you feel a connection develop between you and what you are observing. Expressly set your intention to remain connected for the duration of the process, and continue to observe the object for the duration of the process.

Apply the same process for your whole body and for each area of the body that you will be directing, checking periodically to refresh each of the connections already established. For example, you would pay attention to your shoulders until you felt a connection form, then expressly set your intention to remain connected with your shoulders.

What I heard in Ted's lectures percolated within me for more than a year. In the interim between Ted's lectures on attention and my momentous lessons with Ruth, Betsy introduced me to Dr. Liz Charles in February 2023, who was and is conducting a feasibility study to determine whether SSP therapy can ameliorate the effects of Parkinson's disease. In June 2023, I became a participant in that study and began to listen to filtered music under Dr. Liz's supervision.

From the beginning, listening to several minutes of the filtered music twice a week produced tangible effects that diminished between sessions, but not

entirely: my voice became stronger, my walking more fluid, my shoulders widened, my breathing deepened, and my facial features became more mobile. As time passed and the total number of sessions increased, the improvements described above diminished less between sessions until, eventually, I did not experience a diminishment of whatever I had gained so that when I began the next session, I would not have to catch up, only continue to improve. And now, listening for approximately three minutes per day, three days a week, the effects do not diminish.

In addition to these physical effects, my self-perception has substantially progressed. Having ignored what was happening in my body for decades, it was extraordinary to be able to identify areas that were tense and to sense internal changes as they occurred. This was what my earlier experiences with the Alexander Technique had been, but only with the help of a teacher. These abilities are essential for inhibiting and directing on my own.

The SSP study is ongoing. Subjectively, I believe that utilizing this therapy has been enormously helpful to me from the beginning: physically, mentally, and psychologically, it has put me in touch with myself.

I believe the sequence of attention and intention I began practicing during Ted's classes has helped me learn to inhibit and direct without the prompting of a teacher. It is a matter of paying attention until I feel there is a relationship established, setting my intention to maintain that relationship, and moving on to establish a different relationship. This process helped me bring myself from having a "word/bubble/wish" floating against a body part to having something real that connected me within myself. When I could do that, I could think my thoughts and feel my body lightening, loosening, changing. So now, I trust in my ability to connect my thought to myself, although I still have to wait to see if my messages have been received and acted upon. The changes are always quicker and more magnified when Ruth has her hands on me, or is even in the same room, but I now have tools that help me to work more confidently and independently.

Now that Ruth is away again for a few months, I am on my own without other teachers' support, and I continue to do a lie-down every day, maybe for fifteen minutes. Other stuff has to get done, otherwise I would spend more time with it. I don't think I've regressed since our last lessons and look forward to when we resume to check that out.

Before my Alexander Technique lessons, it never occurred to me to think about my self, my body, my movement, at all. As I began lessons, at first, I never used to remember to think during the course of the day. Now, it's very helpful to keep the whole image of myself and then think more specifically of a part—my shoulders, my upper back—and I inhibit and direct as needed. I will think like that several times in the course of the day, attending to different areas of my body.

At this stage, I can't mindlessly walk across the room; I would be taking a big risk of losing my balance and falling. Now, as I walk, I work on myself, hoping to maintain my balance and also improve my use. Missy counsels me to first stand as straight as I can, open my eyes wide, keep breathing, think Up, and begin to walk. The mental effort of doing that is worthwhile: it gives me the opportunity of practicing the discipline of inhibiting and directing. It doesn't happen that often that I feel more upright, lighter, or that I lose the feeling of having to make a huge effort to move, but when I am successful, it looks better, and it feels better.

Conclusion

Roy:

Before Ruth left for a trip during the summer of 2017, I believed that learning the Alexander Technique was right for me because of the changes brought on while working with her. Working with Ruth thereafter and working with Betsy and Missy and Ted strengthened that belief. During the summer and fall of 2023, SSP helped me to become more self-aware and open to change. This helped me to integrate and actually utilize what I had learned about how to practice the Alexander Technique. In other words, I was finally able to connect my intellect to my body. When I met with Ruth in December 2023, I felt more in touch with myself. Ruth's response told me how far I had come. I believe that Ruth's multiple roles in helping me learn how to practice the Alexander Technique were crucial to my development. It would not have happened without her.

Ruth:

This is a story of one student's history, abilities, and strong motivation to learn and change that merged with the principles of the Alexander Technique, experiments in movement and rest positions, and the hands-on skills and varying ways of communicating and delivering instruction by four people trained to teach the Alexander Technique, plus the effects of SSP. When I told a colleague about Roy's breakthrough, she said, "You never know when the penny will drop." I inferred from her comment that I had done everything possible, and we just had to wait for Roy's internal processes to bring him to a point of change. That might have been the case. When Roy describes what other teachers say to him, I sometimes scratch my head. *Didn't I say similar things to him, and often?* I would love to have reported Roy's growth came entirely through my insights and ever-increasing skill set, but there are other factors. Sometimes it takes different words and a different person saying them for a learner to absorb and integrate a concept. The SSP may be helping Roy be more available to change as his nervous system becomes re-tuned toward connection and safety and shifts away from fight, flight, and shutdown.

Missy told me long ago that when a student learns, you can't take full responsibility, but when they don't learn, you also can't take full responsibility. I am delighted that Roy has made this giant leap forward into becoming able to work independently. I am happy to be part of the village that has given him new possibilities and look forward to our continuing adventure into the unknown.

Postscript

Ruth:

While preparing to submit this article, Roy and I resumed lessons, and we are both gratified to learn that yes, his independent work has been effective. He has really moved into another stage in learning.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ruth Rootberg (ATSNE, 2003) trained with Missy Vineyard. She has published two volumes of *Living the Alexander Technique*, one in 2015 and another in 2018, and has written frequently for *AmSAT Journal*. Ruth has volunteered for AmSAT on the *AmSAT Journal* team, the Credentials Review Committee, the Professional Conduct Committee, the Membership Committee, the Member Handbook Updating Committee, the Board, and the Leadership Advisory Council. In 2017, she received the AmSAT Distinguished Service Award. Ruth teaches in Amherst, Massachusetts, and continues to write about the Technique.



Photo by Clive J. Mealey

Roy Regozin was born in 1942 and grew up on Long Island, New York. He attended Yale College (BA), Cornell University (MA), and Yale Law School (LLB). He practiced law in New York and Washington, DC, with the firm Cahill Gordon & Reindel LLP from 1968 to 2009. Roy married in 1982 and has three children and one granddaughter. In 2012, he and his wife moved to Western Massachusetts. Roy began Alexander Technique lessons in 2017. In 2019, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He began SSP therapy in 2023.



Photo courtesy of Roy Regozin